

Terra Incognita

a new generation
of science fiction

Number 1 • Winter 1996/1997
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Fiction and Articles by
Nicola Griffith
L. Timmel Duchamp
Kandis Elliot
Darrell Schweitzer
W. Gregory Stewart
Michael Ford



An Interview with Octavia E. Butler





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The World as We *Don't* Know It

DID YOU EVER RECOMMEND A SCIENCE-FICTION BOOK TO SOMEONE, ONLY TO BE answered with a sneer? Did you ever hear anyone protest, "Oh, but I just don't like science fiction"? All too often, bright, open-minded people turn away from what might well be a fulfilling and enlightening story because they have already decided that works of science fiction cannot possibly be enjoyable—or, if they are enjoyable, then devoid of meaning.

Usually, people believe they have very good reasons for their prejudices. I knew a man who, with a confidence he thought was perfectly justified, dismissed all sf as escapist. And a woman once said to me, "As soon as I see people in silly uniforms, or read about laser guns and aliens, my mind just shuts off—I just tune out. But it makes sense, really. After all, science fiction has nothing to do with me."

We hope that *Terra Incognita* will go some way toward curing people of such misunderstandings about science fiction.

Terra Incognita is the magazine of Earth-based science fiction, and the sf in its pages is not just a puerile escape from the world. Writers want to write, and readers to read, stories which allow them to take a good look at human nature. The devices of sf—the ability to look at things from a different angle, to hold reality up to the greater measure of imagination—can bring about deep insight into who we are. What is a greater trial of love than to have to choose—literally—between someone's body and soul? Can a person hold to her values when those of the rest of the world have utterly collapsed?

Imagining ordinary people in remarkable situations is one of the best ways to explore human nature. But if the situation gets too remarkable, it can easily get in the way. It is from too many gratuitous space battles and bug-eyed monsters that the skeptical reader shies away. Earth-based sf offers its readers and writers just enough altitude to get a different perspective on the world without so much distance that the fiction loses its relevance; *Terra Incognita* presents our own world, but as we've never seen it before.

Thus, those very stories which appeal to today's sf fans are capable of answering the complaints of those who believe that sf has nothing to offer.

To readers concerned that sf is a waste of their time—that such stories have nothing to do with their lives—we invite you to reconsider in the face of the evidence you now hold in your hands. You will see sf differently.

And to those in the know, those who have already figured out that sf can be both enlightening and relevant and are here looking to have a good time, you're in luck. You'll find clones and time travel, dark futures and wondrous journeys, adventure and romance.

Because, of course, good science fiction is nothing if not fun.

—Jan Berrien Berends

Terra Incognita

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Cover:

"Terraformer II" by Lissanne Lake, 1988. With this piece, Lake wanted to represent symbolically the task of a terraformer. "Terraformer I," a companion piece, takes a more scientific and technical look at the process of turning a planet into a habitable world. Lake's art appears on over sixty book covers—as well as countless game boxes, magazines, and cards—and will grace the cover of Terry Pratchett's new book, *Men at Arms*. She can be reached at PO Box 3037, Weehawken NJ 07087.

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Ms Peach Makes a Run for Coffee

by L. Timmel Duchamp

Illustrated by Keith Minnion

MS PEACH HOARSELY SILENCED THE ALARM. WHEN SHE forced open her thickly gummed eyelids she saw that sometime during the night the clock-radio had switched to battery power. Belatedly she noticed the white noise scritch in her ears. Another hit on the generator, she conjectured as she searched for a working station.

Dressing, Ms Peach listened to the news and weather reports broadcast by one of the two stations in the city equipped with backup generators. She knew one had to take anything gleaned from impersonal sources as a probable lie, but found any news preferable to that blank emptiness into which rumor, speculation, and private fantasy of direst catastrophe inevitably crept. And weather predictions, at least, had a reasonable chance of being true.

MS PEACH ARRIVED at the Auvergne Preparatory Academy for Young Women sticky and sweaty from the long dirty walk, though not disheveled—as she observed of two colleagues sharing her elevator. One could not afford to procrastinate ironing one's clothes or washing one's dishes or body, for one never knew when water and power cuts would interfere with the orderly processes of civilized living. Ms Peach shook her head over the teachers who'd been caught unprepared: Ms Auvergne would have something sharp to say to them, indubitably; and if there were already notes of past lapses in their files, they'd be looking for work by the end of the week. The teachers must be at least as neatly turned out as the girls; that stood to reason. "You are living examples to the students," Ms Auvergne reminded them at every staff meeting. "Your appearance and deportment must be exemplary!" Staring out at the faces in her homeroom class, Ms Peach swallowed against the lump in her throat; her eyes watered as she thought of the dozens of clean, pressed blouses hanging in these girls' closets. Never did *their* blazers show signs of wear and tear or even the spills

normal to adolescent clumsiness. (*When Melanie was a teenager she never could wear a blouse two days running. And her school blazer always seemed to be missing a button, which I insisted was her responsibility, not mine. Their mothers of course have unlimited access to water and electricity, and probably maids as well.*) Ms Peach frowned down at the printout of the day's announcements to be read once the signal had been given and the Pledge of Allegiance recited. Would her aging quality suit last another term? She had better start saving the money for a new one. Ms Auvergne gave no quarter when it came to propriety and appearance. "If we do not observe the decencies here, who will?" Ms Peach had once heard her say to a teary-eyed teacher under ultimatum to replace her shabby threadbare suit.

Who indeed? Ms Peach wondered as the signal pulsed through the halls and classrooms of the school. *Who indeed?*

WHEN MS PEACH ENTERED the Staff Lounge at morning break, she found her colleagues in fevered discussion of three choice (if not prime) pieces of news. According to the local NBC affiliate, the Mayor and City Council were at that very moment debating whether or not to request Federal Assistance. Colonel Lewis's faction, of course, opposed doing any such thing, and reportedly persisted in citing what had happened in the city of M—when FEMA had complied with its mayor's request for assistance. That *their* Mayor, however, increasingly inclined these days towards bringing in the feds posed no mystery for any of the teachers taking morning break in Auvergne's Staff Lounge. "We just about have a military junta running this city instead of the Mayor or the City Council," Ms Devine stated bluntly, provoking alarmed looks from her colleagues.

Nervous chatter poured into the pool of silence rippling outward from Ms Devine's solecism, so that Ms Peach soon learned the second piece of news, an item her colleagues

lingered over the way uncouth sorts of individuals worried at torn cuticles. Ms Auvergne, rumor declared, had terminated Ms Garfield not half an hour ago. "Someone," Ms Peach was told when she inquired as to the provenance of the rumor, had gotten the word from Mr. Wastecote, Ms Auvergne's Chief Assistant. "When the Stanton girl got cheeky with her in First Period PE, Garfield hauled off and slapped her one," another colleague whispered into Ms Peach's ear. Ms Peach tsked-tsked. The Stanton girl had the smartest mouth in the Sophomore class, which called for especially controlled and crafty handling. Ms Peach sympathized with Garfield; she could easily imagine the poor woman's state of mind, starting the morning with a wrinkled blouse and a sweaty filthy walk, followed by a sharp reprimand and a note in one's personnel file, only to have to face the little bitches with their knowing smirks in homeroom. . . . Clearly, it had been just too much for Ms Garfield. Still, not every teacher merited a position at Auvergne's. . . .

Five minutes before the end of break, the third tidbit of news burst upon the Staff Lounge when one of the new teachers (Ms Peach could not keep track of all their names; it was enough that one had to remember the names of all the students in the school) dashed through the door and shouted over the din of their mostly female voices, "Coffee! They're selling real coffee beans for B-series currency over in the S— District!"

Pandemonium ensued. Ms Peach frantically fought her way through the crowd that had instantly formed around the teacher who had made the announcement. Coffee! She hadn't had real coffee for months. She would pay *anything* for a handful of coffee beans, for of all things the lack of coffee in her life had been the most intolerable. Water and toothpaste shortages paled in comparison with coffee deprivation. She hated the vile, sickeningly tannic black tea she had taken to drinking solely for its caffeine content.

If it didn't prove a baseless rumor and someone actually was selling coffee for B-series currency, somehow, some way she would get hold of it—even if she had to mortgage her soul to do so.

MS PEACH SPENT most of her lunch break queuing for the use of the telephone. For nearly the entire time, the two secretaries directly ahead of her exchanged nauseating details of student gossip about the previous weekend's debutante balls. Ms Peach soothed her nerves by slowly and rhythmically stroking her soft, worn silk scarf. It was a fact that she had not been able to resist wearing it just about every day since purchasing it a year and a half ago in a quality used clothing store on the fringe of the H— Park District. The first day Ms Peach had worn the scarf, Ms Auvergne had flicked it a knowing, cynical look, and her eyebrow had most definitely cocked; but so precious did Ms

Peach rate her find that the Director's merely silent criticism did not touch her.

Ms Peach watched the clock as she waited and, as the minutes crept by, grew anxious. What if Melanie were out of the office? Suppose she had decided to eat her lunch somewhere other than at her (admittedly depressing) desk? The expense of the call would then have been incurred in vain, Ms Peach's own lunch break wasted.

Still she had never since the city had introduced their damned inferior currency heard of coffee being sold outside the Federal Dollar shops. Ms Peach knew she would never forgive herself if she failed to pursue this golden opportunity.

After twenty minutes of patient waiting, Ms Peach found herself next up. Without prompting she handed her ID strip and currency disk to the security officer and supplied him with Melanie's name and number. The secretary ahead of her finished quickly. The officer pushed Ms Peach's strip and disk at her and told her to make her call. Ms Peach slipped the disk into the beep-box; languorously (for what little energy the man had seemed to Ms Peach to be devoted solely to the unlit cigar such an unsightly soggy mess in his mouth), the officer input Melanie's name and number.

When Melanie answered on the first ring, Ms Peach breathlessly explained about the coffee, then asked her daughter whether she should pursue the lead after school, and if there were coffee to be had how much of their funds she should allocate to its purchase.

"Of course you have to go for it," Melanie said, "it would be crazy not to! What a chance!" She sighed. "If only we had some savings, it's such a perfect investment. Can you imagine how much profit we could make if we resold it ourselves?"

Ms Peach gulped at her daughter's lack of caution. Normally listeners didn't bother with people like herself, but rumor had it that some listeners monitored lines on a random basis.

"Let me think, let me think," Melanie said.

Aware that they had been talking nearly an entire minute, Ms Peach rushed on, "Of course, if you think we can't afford it, Melanie, I surely do understand." Since Melanie made half again as much as Ms Peach did, spending decisions for elastic consumption must be hers to make. Miserable at her own longing, Ms Peach feebly continued, "It's just that of all things, coffee is something I've—"

"Look, here's what we'll do, Mom," Melanie said. Ms Peach flinched at the beep but told herself there was no help for it now. "You buy as much as you can get for what we have in our joint account. Whatever's on the disk, spend it. And in the meantime I'll tell my supervisor I'm ready to take up his offer to do a week or two of overtime."



Overtime! Ms Peach knew what *that* meant; Melanie had told her often enough about how her pig of a supervisor had been pressuring her. "Melanie!" Ms Peach said. "Don't even *consider* it! *It can't be worth it!*" Sweat broke out on Ms Peach's forehead, for even as she said the words she knew that in her treacherous heart of hearts she wanted that coffee so badly that—

But no. She didn't want it *that* badly. What kind of mother would sacrifice her daughter simply for the pleasure of drinking coffee?

But Melanie brushed aside her concern. "I want you to promise me you'll do it, Mom," she said. "Not only will we get coffee for ourselves out of the deal, but it's a chance for getting our head above water, a chance we may not get again." Melanie clicked her tongue. "If only it's not too late by the time you get there. Do you think you could take off from school early? I'd do it myself, but if I'm going to be working something out with Brown then I really can't afford to be taking the afternoon off."

"If you're sure, Melanie," Ms Peach said (and cringed at the quaver in her voice).

"I'm sure," Melanie's voice didn't quaver.

"Then we'd better hang up, dear."

The beep-box squawked about a second after Ms Peach broke the connection, clocking them in just under two minutes. They'd certainly run *that* call close.

AS THE INTRODUCTORY BARS of The Anthem surged through the halls and classrooms of the school, Ms Peach rose to her feet and assumed the properly respectful posture due the ritual. All afternoon the drumbeat of anticipation had been quickening and intensifying her need to tear out of the school and across the city in search of coffee. By ninth period her elation had mounted so exponentially that a nonsense verse—*O Frabjous Day/ Calloo, Calloo! Coffee! I'll soon be drinking coffee!*—took hold of her brain, endlessly repeating itself in merciless iteration, threatening her concentration on the words—so mechanical and glib!—pouring out of her mouth and onto the pages of the students' notebooks. (*They'd write anything down, just anything, never noticing any oddity until they came to reread their notebooks the night before the next test.*) Something about her difficulty in concentrating reminded her that people used to say coffee was a drug, but Ms Peach told herself not to be silly. If coffee were a drug then buying and selling it would not be legal, and the Mayor wouldn't be known to consume three cups of cappuccino every day before noon.

"—for amber waves of grain," Ms Peach and the girls dutifully sang. The girls' eyes slipped sideways, sneaking longing glances out into the corridor (while Ms Peach held hers rigidly on the flag mounted on the wall beside the open door); their hands fidgeted restlessly, their knees,

hips, and feet shifted constantly, betraying how unbearable they found this final obligation in the school day (while Ms Peach's hands furtively writhed behind her back, and her toes wriggled and bent and stretched within the stiff, stern confines of leather-simulated vinyl). All the traditional verses plus two of the new: how unbearable, how intolerable, how excruciating Ms Peach found this afternoon's performance of the daily ritual. Ordinarily it passed indifferently as simply one more moment of prescribed tedium the students disproportionately minded. But today...

The last verse seemed to take as long to get through as all the others combined, but finally it was completed. Hardly able to contain her excitement, Ms Peach dismissed the class, put off till the next day the student who lingered to chat, locked her desk and the classroom, and headed for the staff locker room. *O Frabjous Day/ Calloo, Calloo!* the frenetic voice in her head sped her steps through the corridors.

Coffee! I'll soon be drinking coffee!

WHEN MS PEACH SPOTTED the red plastic tape looped around the lamp post and pulled taut across the intersection, she first assumed that only that particular block had been barricaded off, that a raid was in progress or a manhunt or something of that highly local sort. But as she drew nearer she realized that the red plastic tape, wrapped around every available pole on the opposite side of the street, stretched farther into the murk than her eyes could follow. And when she observed the city police staked at intervals facing her side of the street, she swallowed on a suddenly dry throat and glanced nervously at the impassively boarded buildings around her. Could they have sealed off the entire district? One knew, of course, that such things happened. But wouldn't national guard—and not city police—then be staked along the perimeter?

Until this disconcerting point Ms Peach had strode the streets with reasonable confidence, elation—*O Frabjous day/ Calloo, Calloo!*—and certainty of success. (To accomplish anything in this godforsaken city one had to believe in the success of one's undertaking.) Now, as she walked as naturally as she could past the police (separated from her by only a trash-strewn expanse of empty concrete street), anxiety and doubt assailed her. It had been just such a situation in which Dick had been snared—though on the other side of the tape. But who knew that they wouldn't suddenly decide to shift the Fire Zone a few blocks to the east, thus trapping her willy-nilly inside? Dick had been checking out a rumor of shortwave radios being sold for B-series currency and had gotten caught in the crossfire between national guardsmen and a drug gang. From all that they had pieced together afterwards it seemed likely he hadn't even known the area he was in had been designated a Fire Zone, but had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They were

always claiming on the radio and TV that if you obeyed the laws and minded your own business you had nothing to fear. And now here she was, on the same kind of errand Dick had been on when he had been. . . .

Absorbed in her thoughts, Ms Peach nearly cannoned into the cop blocking the sidewalk. "This is a Fire Zone, lady," he yelled at her. He jerked his thumb backwards at the red plastic tape Ms Peach belatedly noticed had been slung across the intersection. "Can't you read? You can't go any further."

Ms Peach swallowed in an effort to work some saliva into her panic-dried throat. "Uh, could you give me some idea, officer, of how far the barricade extends?" Ms Peach hated the tremor and unnaturally high pitch she heard coming out of her own mouth. The cop, she knew, must despise her for being so easily intimidated.

The big plastic bubbles set into his face mask imbued his glare with a frightening aura of menace. "That's none of your business, is it." His hand shifted to his holster; he leaned forward. "Or is it?"

Ms Peach's head wobbled back and forth, back and forth. "I . . . uh . . . ah thank you, officer," she stammered as she staggered backwards. After Dick's accident the national guard had claimed he had been a member of the drug gang, and had insisted on counting him as a hit for their side. Back then they had needed a high body count to keep from being superseded. And of course, because of Captain Burton's admanance in the matter, Ms Peach and Melanie had both been suspended from their jobs until they had managed to prove themselves completely innocent of "knowledge" of Dick's supposed association with thugs. This had been difficult because Dick had once been a card-carrying member of the ACLU. Fortunately, though, the national guard eventually verified that neither Melanie nor herself had ever belonged to such pro-criminal organizations. . . .

Ms Peach retraced her steps to the previous intersection, and headed east for a while—just to be safe. This detour pushed her further and further out of her way (and now the circle she would have to make—presuming her destination didn't lay within the Fire Zone—arced far east and north from where she wanted to go), but as her experience just now running into that cop demonstrated, walking along the perimeter of a Fire Zone was madness. In retrospect, she counted herself lucky that he hadn't taken her for an out-of-town reporter who had somehow slipped past the city's checkpoints, or a member of a drug gang.

The police and the guard were there to make the city safe, granted; but Ms Peach preferred to avoid direct contact with them.

(Could it be I'm paranoid because I have a guilty conscience? I am hoping to buy enough coffee to be able to resell some at a profit. People might do such deals all the time, but it isn't legal.)

Ms Peach walked three blocks east before resuming her northerly direction. How far, she wondered, should she continue north before trying to go west again?

But the beating throb of helicopter rotors overhead stopped her dead in her tracks. She threw back the hood of her overcape and craned her neck to see. The three craft within her scope of vision flew low enough for Ms Peach to distinguish the big nozzle attachments loosely dangling from their bellies. Gas, she realized in sudden panic. They were going to gas the Fire Zone! With fingers made clumsy by violent trembling, Ms Peach drew her hood tightly over her head and snapped the cross-placket into position across the lower half of her face. How fortunate that the air was so bad today that she'd had to wear her breather; for it meant she wouldn't have to worry about asphyxiation. She only hoped that whatever they sprayed wouldn't be hard on her eyes.

Precautions in place, Ms Peach ran to the next intersection and turned east. After only half a block her side ached and she was gasping for breath. Still Ms Peach pushed herself—until she saw the drab olive green vans barreling around the corner, hurtling straight towards her. Her legs shook, her heart raced and pounded in terror at the nightmare image rushing upon her. She threw herself flat against the board-covered windows of the nearest building and watched the vans speed past. Was she now inside a Fire Zone? Should she try to find refuge somewhere in the neighborhood? Surely there must be some business establishments left in the area, it must be that not paying attention she hadn't particularly noticed any of the old storefronts open, she didn't really know this neighborhood, she had just assumed she would be passing (quickly) through, en route to her final destination. . . .

Ms Peach stood dazed. The smell of cordite drifted around her. The world felt, looked, smelled utterly strange. Her eyes fastened on the boarded-up building opposite, on the ONE COUNTRY UNDER GOD and AMERICA FOR REAL AMERICANS neatly stenciled over its disorder.

What am I doing here? she wondered after an indeterminate amount of time had passed. For a few appalling moments she couldn't remember where she was or what she had been doing. The distant flapping of helicopters, though, jolted her back to reality. Coffee, she reminded herself. She was hot on the trail of coffee being sold for B-series currency. . . .

Ms Peach glanced up and down the street. The coffee wasn't worth it. The sane thing to do was to forget about it and concentrate on getting herself home in one piece. Ms Peach had of course heard stories of people doing rash deeds simply to get their hands on bootleg liquor. Such behavior had always struck her as crazy—perhaps even psychotic—rather than heroic (as some people would have

it). *She* did not care to lose her life simply for the sake of a few pounds of coffee beans. . . .

(*It's not like I'm addicted to it.*)

Ms Peach drew a deep breath and stepped resolutely away from the wall. Determined to escape this section of the city, she struck out in the westerly direction she had been taking before she had paused to rest. As she scuttled along at her top speed she asked herself how she could have been so crazy as to have put herself in danger for the sake of coffee. Of course, she excused herself, it had never occurred to her that getting to the S— district would be dangerous, and she certainly hadn't known that this part of the city had gone so, well, *deserted*. Most of the street signs had disappeared. Everything looked derelict. But when she'd been through here just six months ago there had still been plenty of life left in the area, and she couldn't now recall anyone having mentioned this neighborhood as one of those that had "gone." Crossing the intersection of an unmarked side street (whose name she could not remember), Ms Peach averted her eyes from the sight of abandoned vehicles crammed bumper to bumper over every inch of its pavement. Now *that* sort of thing could happen in any neighborhood, the owners of those cars might very well be living in the upper stories of the buildings on that street. . . .

Finally Ms Peach reached a thoroughfare teeming with pedestrian traffic, news-sheet vendors and Pepsi kiosks. Her eyes filled with tears; her knees shook. For a few seconds Ms Peach gasped for breath (in spite of the oxygen feeding directly into her nostrils, in spite of the fact that she had had no trouble breathing back *there*). A part of her longed to grab one of the many people she passed and tell them what a scare she had had coming so close to a Fire Zone. But since most of her knew that doing so would be sheer craziness,

Ms Peach restrained her need for an outburst and kept her agitation to herself.

Home, she whispered as she walked, *home*. And once home she could tell Melanie about it, and Melanie would—

Ms Peach halted, indifferent to the curses of the people whose path she thus blocked. Melanie wouldn't be home when she got there. Undoubtedly Melanie had already committed herself to . . . overtime. For the coffee. Which Ms Peach had failed to procure. . . .

Ms Peach stared at the kiosks and vendors and people passing. A gleaming burgundy Mercedes glided by. A vendor of news-sheets exhorted passersby to read about the Great Debate between the Mayor and City Council. Tears welled up in Ms Peach's eyes. She whispered to herself that not only the entire world but she and Melanie were mad, too. Everything mad, crazy, lost. . . .

No, she must go back. Because of what Melanie had committed herself to doing. How else would she be able to look into her daughter's eyes when she arrived home after having done . . . overtime?

She could lie to Melanie, of course, and say that the rumor had been false, or that all the coffee had been sold by the time she had got there. But if she lied to Melanie then everything would be over, finished, desolate. Then she *would* be entirely alone.

Ms Peach blinked furiously and gulped several times to force her quivering mouth and watery eyes into passable neutrality. She would have to go back. She would have to try again, taking another direction.

Crazy, Ms Peach whispered as she pushed herself west. *We're all crazy in this city*. But always, whatever the situation, one did what one must. And in this case, that meant making a run for coffee.

II

We'd Love to Hear from You

We welcome letters from our readers. Please let us know what you think of this, the first issue of *Terra Incognita*. Do you like the stories? Do you like the articles? What do you think of the art and the typographic design? What about the theme? Tell us the good; tell us the bad. We're interested in both.

Be sure to tell us your favorite parts of the magazine. We'll keep track and, in the next issue, announce the most popular stories and articles.

But we can't do it if you don't write to us.

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And for those of you who have World Wide Web access, take a look at our web page. Just point your browser to: <http://www.netaxs.com/~incognit>.

The Monitors

by W. Gregory Stewart

Illustrated by Alfred R. Klosterman

THEY SHOULD HAVE MET CUTE—OH YES OH YES—NOT LIKE they did at all. They met ordinary is how they met. And tired, and maybe a little off, a little out of sorts the each of them.

And what they *should* have done was met cute.

If it had been cute, they might have shrugged it off later on; it wouldn't have been the way it was. And maybe things would have been different; or maybe wouldn't have meant so much, would have happened differently or could have changed. And maybe not. But if not, and even so, then they would at least have had having met cute. They would have had *that*.

This is maybe how they should have met: Out to dinner, each alone—which is how it often is anyway—alone and out to dinner. And then some one of them would have, should have, tripped and fallen laughing across the other's gazpacho or grits or whatever, and . . . Wait—let it happen to her. Let him fall across her meal, and let her look up, smiling to him and the maitre d' beyond, and say, "Waiter, there's a guy in my soup." And everybody laughing all fall down—not how it was, but could have been.

Or walking dogs (if there had been dogs to walk and such as they would have had dogs if there were) and then the tangling of one and another in leash and light conversation as their dogs went round about in friendly sniff. Then all huddling together, barking and laughing, say, as the rain came up and it all fell down—not how it was, but could have been.

How it was, was ordinary, though. How it was—it was accidental and laughless, a thing no memory would fondly mark. She had gone, and he had gone, tired and alone to their local commissaries; and it happened that these were the same commissary. And they shared a table, because it was crowded, and that was the way things were done in a crowded commissary.

"May I sit here?" It doesn't matter who said it. No one remembers now anyway. It was a courtesy of form and not of true intent; an announcement and not a real request.

It's how it was.

Maybe someone nodded. Or maybe they each looked at the other. . . . Wait, they did. They *did* look at each other—yes—and, in their weary ways, liked what they saw.

He saw brown hair—dark brown, nearly black—and brown eyes, round and large, and just now red and nearly weeping-weary. A gentle face, he saw, and lips on which a smile might have been nice and more.

She saw blue eyes and a high, high forehead leading to brown hair that tended to blond highlights, and to gray. She saw red behind the blue eyes and the blue of the eyes. She saw a twitch in thin lips that might have been anything but seemed to be smile. And she saw his blue, blue eyes—ice blue, sky blue, sea-blue deep. She saw these.

And one nodded, and one sat, and each ate. Alone.

BUT THEN, and over the weeks and the months—between their separate shifts, when their Primaries are off-line, when they aren't psyched, when they can at all—their chance, not so much by chance as slow intent, each one upon the other eating. Or waiting to be joined to eat. In the minutes they can muster.

For she is, and he is, the same. They do the same thing, and spend much of their days and nights as MediCorps Monitor Units in psych with Primaries who would rather not think about them. Lift her hair—or his—and look behind the left ear: there are the plugs for the psychromonitor. Each has a Primary, and each spends all day mostly in psych with and almost as that Primary: watching, learning, living from a distance; action from the field.

She sees what her Primary sees; she monitors that. And she tastes what her Primary tastes. And he hears what his

Primary hears, and feels the same things, and smells as well what his Primary smells. They shake the hands that their Primaries shake, and make love as their Primaries make it—and with whom they make it. Far and distant and unseen, observers on the outside, inside. They know what they know, and how. They are monitor units after all, after all. It is their job, and more than a job—a way of life, and a life itself. So we suppose, here and now and on our own side of things, not really knowing and not wanting to.

But wait—we move along.

He is a monitor; she is a monitor. And the only free time, off time, *them* time they have is when their Primaries sleep and they have whatever time they have: to unsynch and clear their heads wearily, wearily and worn; to shake off the workwebs; to sleep themselves and find some tiny place of their own; to be themselves. Just to be. It is a demanding life, if you call it a life at all, and we do, whether they do or not. We do, not knowing.

They don't.

"Oh," she says, "you'll never guess what I did today," meaning her Primary, what her *Primary* did today. And of course he doesn't guess, not usually anyway. But sometimes, maybe. Usually not. "Oh, this. Oh, that," she says.

And he smiles. He tells her about his day in time; bits and pieces, here and there among the minutes they can find for themselves.

Bits and pieces. Everything is built of bits and pieces, here and there, like love—like houses of straw.

They will need to sleep themselves, when their Primaries sleep. But monitors need a little time as well—an hour here or there, a meal, a quick hello—to be themselves, unlinked, unsynched, unplugged, and naked. They find a little time in the commissaries, out of their rooms, out of the monitoring stations (their homes is what those are: monitoring couches that are beds besides, beside the porcelain and the food-prep areas). They sneak away, they side-step it awhile, before they go off to sleep with alarm units plugged in and reading the Primary signals, waiting to wake them before the Primary stirs from a sleep, too brief and too sweet. . . . A monitor finds a Primary's convenience convenient.

But a monitor gets to dream her own dreams. Or his own nightmares. A monitor gets to grab a few minutes for something like a life.

In between and among.

Which is how they found each other—in between and among.

And it is how they fell in love.

Bits and pieces.

ONE DAY THIS HAPPENS: They meet and smile shyly. They do not eat. He reaches out his hand; she takes it. Or she reaches, and he takes hers: it doesn't matter now; it doesn't

matter anymore. Hands are held, and smiles exchanged, shyly.

"How did...?" "I don't..." "Was it..." "Wonderful..."

His Primary met her Primary—and hers, his—that day, somehow. A miracle, maybe. Cruel or kind, a miracle. And their Primaries smiled, and the smiles turned to touch. And the touch, to passion.

They made love as Primaries and—not driven, not driving—as monitors and in the back seat, then, that day, watching in wonder and waiting for the sleep of a Primary, waiting to see each other, waiting and eager. And when they meet, they smile shyly. And make love in the minutes that they have for a first time and a second, wondering at the miracle of it, at the lives on either side of everything, touching both ways, all ways, and spent, finally. Then briefly to sleep. . . .

OH," SHE SAYS. "You'll never guess. . . ."

And he won't at all. He doesn't even try. He has his own thing to tell her, this day, and he waits. He smiles a bit as she speaks, a distracted and bittersweet smile. And it is distracted and bittersweet that he is feeling—more bitter than sweet, perhaps—and his turn is coming.

He waits.

They have minutes. She looks into his eyes: There is something wrong, she sees, something in the blue that is not sky and is not ice. Something sad and far away and too, too close.

"What is it?"

"I'm going in tomorrow. I've been called."

She pales at this. She looks in his eyes and looks away.

"Do you know...?"

He shakes his head. "I've been called," he says simply.

"I've been called." It says all of these things—too much, enough, and nothing.

He has been called. He says no more.

WHEN SHE SEES him again, he is blind.

Where, oh where, are his blue, blue eyes? She lost herself once and always in those eyes, and they are gone. Has she lost herself? Is she gone thereby? She doesn't know, but he has lost his eyes. Dark sockets mark where the sky had been—where the sea had shown—cavernous and cold. She looks, and she looks away. His eyes are gone.

Or not—his Primary wears new eyes this day. *His eyes*—cut from him and given to his Primary. Or not *given* to the Primary, as much as *reclaimed* by the Primary. He has been grown a clone for parts: a monitor clone, maybe, but a medi-clone certainly. And now his eyes are their eyes—his and his Primary's—as they have always been, in fact, his Primary eyes. Now his Primary has custody, and now he has the night.

She wants to run away. She wants to gather him up to her.

He smiles at her, blindly. It is odd in that it is eyeless, this smile. The skin wrinkles about the sockets, but there is no warmth in this. It is odd, this smile.

"I will see you tomorrow," he tells her.

He cannot see her now. He cannot see her tears, and he is too new to blindness to hear the grief in her breathing. "I will see you in psych." When he is linked and psyched, he will still see what his Primary sees: her Primary and so her.

"Yes," she says, taking his hand and kissing it. "Yes."

But she does not know what she means.

IT IS FUNNY: it is funny how the world works. It is later: it is more than days later; it is not yet years later. It is later, and enough so that they have gotten by some of it—not all of it, but some. Enough, maybe. But maybe not.

She sees the blue of his eyes in his Primary when her Primary sees his, and he sees her, eyes and all, the same way. They see in psych, and it is not enough, but they touch together and it is what they have right now: a life removed, once at least, and many times again, likely.

It is what they have, and it is not enough.

And by the time it is enough, by the time they have learned how to live with it somewaysomehow, something else happens.

SHE TOUCHED his hand, and said nothing. By now, he knew how to hear the things his eyes kept from him. He heard the silence, her silence, and the things it held.

"What's wrong?" He had not seen her today. His Primary had argued with hers some days ago, and the rift remained, for now. It was painful, and it was who they were.

"What's wrong?" He asked this again.

She did not know how to say it to make it kind or gentle; she did not know how to say it at all.

So she said it quickly.

"She died today. She killed herself. I go up tomorrow."

Her Primary was dead; it does not matter how, not now, not then. It does not matter. Her Primary was dead; and because of who she was, she would take the place of her Primary—and who she had been—and take the world, and what the world was. It was why she had been a monitor, after all: to gracefully, seamlessly, slide into the life that was now waiting for an occupant, into the life-to-let that lay before her.

She would go up. She would become her Primary.

She would have a life.

SHE WOULD HAVE what she would have, and he would stay behind, blind and bound to whatever kind of a life would be left him. Blind and bound. Behind.



He wept. No—eyeless, he sobbed, and broke upon those sob, on the backs of them, moving on waves of grief to crash on dark shores. And she wept as well, yet grew excited, anticipating a life. She would have a life.

"I will bring you up," she said. "I will find you and kill you and bring you up. Then we will have lives and a life," she said, "together."

He smiled at her, sadly, and she wished she could read his eyes, the dark of his eyes, the depths. She thought of the sky, and she wished these things.

"I will find you and kill you, your Primary," she promised.

And he shook his blind head heavily, and, "Yes, please. Do this thing, so that we may be together, please. You are what I know of life. Please do this thing," he said in a voice like dark and brittle stone, shaking his heavy, blind head and seeming to shrink.

She left him, wondering what he had not seen, wondering what he had heard. She left him with resolve: she *would* bring him up.

She left him in confusion, and sorrow. She left, more than anything, excited.

And she would bring him up.

THE NEXT DAY, she goes up. She is told what to expect; she is given a persona, she becomes an entity in the eyes of certain law, and she is given a full life. She is given the world of her Primary, and her Primary's part in that world, and all that had wrapped around her Primary now wraps around her.

She is given her Primary's name. She has not had a name before; no monitor does. She is given the name, and she takes it.

It is the way of the thing.

She plays with her name a long time, getting used to it, making it hers. Until now, she has known that these were syllables to which her Primary responded, but somehow she was separate from that response. She herself was nameless, and could attach no more significance to the sound of that name than she could to words like *guineo* or *murmur*.

And she plays with her new life, getting used to that as well. Somehow, it is easier to assume the life than the name. She does not think about this too much; she does not think about this at all. At all.

At all.

A day comes. A special day. His Primary has requested to see her. He knows what has happened; that she has gone up, that she is dead and replaced, that the way is walked by a fleshly ghost. He knows this and must meet the ghost.

And she must prepare her a murder, she thinks; she must prepare her this.

So it is that she acquires blades and beams, projectiles and poisons, things of death. She will choose from these when she must; that she has them now will allow that to happen at all. She knows what his Primary looks like: him. She has seen him as monitor and through her own Primary. She will know him.

She is prepared.

"Hello," he says when he arrives. And he says her name. He is shy, tentative, uncertain. It is possible that he is in some way responsible for the death of her Primary, but she does not, somehow, know this. A monitor watches, but a monitor does not read minds.

He is shy and uncertain, and so he comes head bowed before her.

Gun, she thinks, garotte, dagger. Dirk.

And he is shy before her.

"Hello," she says, in her turn.

"Do you know me?"

"Yes. I do."

"I loved her. You. I love you. I think. This is so hard."

She nods. It is hard, but she knows what must be done. Then—and doubt—she does not. For if she brings him up, he will come up blind, still blind, and be so always, because so much is done, and no more. There are no spare parts for the spare part, and the eyes would die so soon, too soon.

And then he looks up. He looks at her. Into her eyes, and smiles.

And she looks at him, and into his eyes—his eyes—into his sea-blue, swelling eyes before she can stop or look away, and knows that she cannot kill him and that she cannot keep him, not kill the one, not keep the other, and that she cannot turn away. She knows that she must somehow have both and neither, always and never, forever.

She looks into those eyes then, smiling sadly at someone who is not in the room with them, watching every move.

"And I love *you*," she says, shaking her heavy head.

"I love you," she says from behind a bittersweet smile.

And she stares, forever frozen, into blue, blue eyes.

II

Attention Subscribers

If you move (and before you do so, if possible), please let us know! To change your address, you need to give us your old address (including your zip or postal code) and your new address (again, including your zip or postal code—the 9-digit code if possible). Otherwise, we won't be able to send you your next issue!

Alien in Our Own Tongue

by Nicola Griffith

IMAGINE BEING SIX YEARS OLD AND reading an anthropology primer about Stone Age Man:

"After a hard day's search for food on the veldt, Stone Age Man was probably glad to get back to the warm cave. No doubt he was comforted by the same everyday activities we are today: the heat of the fire, good food, his family about him. Can you imagine him laughing and tousling your hair? Can you see him picking up your six month old baby brother and breast-feeding him—"

At this point, the six-year-old might burst into tears in sheer confusion. He? Breast-feed? "Don't cry," says the teacher. "It's all right. We all get confused at first. You just have to remember that he really means 'he or she.' See? It's easy!"

But it's not easy. It makes no sense to the six-year-old. Why say 'he' when you mean 'she'? As she grows older, she will keep asking. No one will give her an answer she understands. Her tears of bewilderment will become ones of rage. She will get tired of reading about Man the Hunter, mankind's outward urge to the stars, the exogamous impulses of man, the man on the street, one man one

vote. . . . She will be sick to death of continually being excluded.

"No, no, no," you might say gently, "she's not being excluded. He is inclusive. He means us all. She'll learn. After all, he is the generic pronoun in English."

If that truly were the case, if he and man really did mean 'he and she' and 'man and woman,' our six-year-old would not have been confused. But at age six, she has already internalized the real architecture of language; she *knows* that he means 'he' and she means 'she.'

The only thing she doesn't know is how to pretend otherwise, the way grown-ups do. She doesn't understand why she shouldn't point out what seems so obvious to her: he-man language isn't wearing any clothes.

Before you start to sputter, answer the following question honestly. How comfortable would you feel reading this next sentence aloud from our hypothetical anthropology primer: "How long ago was it that man found himself available for sex throughout the whole of his menstrual cycle and not just during a clearly defined oestrus?"

Grammarians may tell us that when we read 'man, mankind, or he' we are supposed to imagine 'people, human-kind, or he and she,' but we don't. In our mind's eye we see men, or boys.

When we are toddlers we know little and care even less about the generic he. We say 'them/they/their' quite happily. "The person in the blue hat looks happy; they're smiling!" Everyone knows what we mean. Then we get to school, and the rule books take over. It is dinned into us that he is the generic pronoun; it must be used. Anything else is sloppy, incorrect, bad grammar. At the same time, everything we see and hear contradicts this. In the written form, for example, we would never see a primer such as the one I have invented. Oh, we would read about Stone Age Man, about his hunting and protecting and inventing fire and all that, but as soon as the authors have to talk about things that only women can do (and no matter how hard they try to make it otherwise, they have to mention women occasionally), they switch pronouns. He, it seems, is only generic insofar as it means 'one of us,' and 'one of us' means 'one of us boys.'

When we lift our heads from our textbooks for a little conversation, we find that our parents, our friends, and the teachers themselves—even at the university level—do not use the generic he in conversation. Person to person, in every day speech, we all understand that he does *not* really mean 'he and she.'

This dichotomy of oral and written form originated three or four hundred years ago in the first English grammars. These grammars were designed for boys preparing for school (girls, of course, did not get any formal schooling). All the examples in the books were for and about boys. The pronouns were all male. They were all male not because it was understood that he meant both male and female, but because women simply did not enter into the equation. These teachers and students were men and boys in a male world, with a male viewpoint and male-centered attitudes.

It was not until the eighteenth century that some grammarian had a brain cramp and decided to make this very specific use of the male pronoun a general rule. Less than a hundred and fifty years ago, in 1850, the 'rule' was still uncertain enough to need mention in an Act of Parliament: "words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females." And then it was cast in stone.

Ah, but women are the ones who teach the children to talk. We're not about to collude in our exclusion from humanity. We all grow up saying 'them' and 'their.' I shudder to think what might happen if that were not so.

Language is an institution—like family, or education system, or church, or peer group—and is one of the prime agencies of socialization. That is, it's one of the means whereby an individual learns the culture of their society. Language tells us what is possible, permissible, and expected. It is through language that we meet, explore, and understand our world. Our understanding of the world is shaped by the words we use to describe it. Those words we use are born from existing words. Those related words are informed by the very concepts and objects they describe. Words do not exist in a vacuum. They do not inhabit the

rarified atmosphere of a grammarian's sterile rule book. Words have weight, texture, and form. They have provenance.

When our eighteenth-century grammarian made *man* the generic noun, *man* had already existed as a noun for a long, long time. It meant then and means now 'an adult male person.' Unless we find a new word for adult male person, *man* as a generic will not work. Its provenance is irreparably male. We may genuinely try to use *man* as a generic, but our attempt will be subverted by the implicit values and attitudes attached to the word.

What I do not understand is why we even try to use male nouns and pronouns as generics when we already have perfectly serviceable alternatives: *humankind*, *they*, *their*, *them*. Why cling to an eighteenth-century rule which is confusing and contradictory and which, with its every use, further excludes, alienates, and reduces the importance of more than half the human race... all to no apparent purpose?

Ah, but perhaps there *is* a purpose. Language, sociologists tell us, is the most profound and effective means of control society exerts over us. The words we use structure our thought and our reality; they help form our opinions and mold our attitudes. The only explanation I can think of for continuing to use this he-man language is because we actually *want* women to feel excluded, alienated, and unimportant.

LANGUAGE SHAPES our thoughts and therefore our imagination. When we read science fiction, or watch it, or listen to it, we are absorbing one person's vision of the future (or present, or past). Whether we like it or not, television now provides visions of the future for more people than all the sf novels put together. Of all the women who grew up on the original *Star Trek*, I

doubt there is a single one who did not get a thrill, a *frisson*, the urge to shout *Yes!* when she saw the premiere of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and heard Captain Picard saying they were all going to boldly go where no *one* had gone before. The future opened like a flower: women could think that maybe in the twenty-fourth century we were a bit more important than we are now. That is a very powerful imaginative tool for a young girl. She will watch that series (and *Zena, Warrior Princess*, and *Lois and Clark*) and know deep in her bones that women *can*. She will probably stay loyal to the series, the spin-offs, the novelizations. She will make the bottom line a lot more healthy for the producers. I suspect that *Babylon Five's* audience would increase significantly if they changed "The Third Age of Mankind" to words that included us. To me it doesn't matter if the second in command of *BS* is a woman, we are still slapped in the face every time we hear those opening credits. Such a slip with the old he-man language, even once, indicates a certain lack of thought on the subject. It means the writers have not sat down and properly examined their attitudes to gender. It makes me wonder: Where else will they slip up with women's roles? Is this series worth my time and effort? It is such a little thing, the "Third Age of Mankind," but it sits like a rock in the road. People like me will be tempted to point the car in a different direction. [Two months after writing this, I discover that the opening sequence *has* changed. It will be interesting to see what happens with the ratings.]

Science fiction novelists and short-story writers don't do much better. It seems that many sf writers can see men fairly clearly in their crystal ball, but women are obscured by a veil. When the spaceship is manned by cadets with IQs matched only by their height in centimeters, we think: Oh, did the women all die? When we read of the

extinction of mankind, we think: Oh, well maybe it was only the *men* who died... but in that case, where are the women? When we hear of man being in a death struggle with some alien species, we wonder: Which side are the women on? Always: Where are the women? What are we doing? How do we fare in this imagined world? It matters. Women need to see their reflections shining back at them from the future.

After all, our six-year-old, as she grows up, will not see many images of herself in her science textbooks.

A while ago I was invited to go talk to a class at the Georgia Institute of Technology who were studying my first novel, *Ammonite*, and Russ's *The Female Man*.

Students do not go to Georgia Tech to study the classics. They generally do not care much for gender studies, or literature, or the humanities. They go to learn about mechanical engineering, nuclear engineering, computers, and other hardware-related subjects. But here they were, brows furrowed, trying to make sense of what I was trying to do in my fiction.

The marvelous thing was: they got it. One man who was studying digital video something-or-other said to me, "I was a third of the way through *Ammonite*, and it was making me more and more uncomfortable, and I didn't know why, and then I realized: All the characters are female. It's all she and her. There were no pronouns for me. It made me feel weird, as though I didn't really matter. And I realized that this is what it must be like for girls growing up, reading their physics books or whatever."

Exactly. Women and girls feel like that a great deal, and not just while we're growing up. I can't blame men for feeling uncomfortable when they get a taste of it. It's not very pleasant. It would be nice, though, if men could take a lesson from the feeling.

I was at a party recently, and a man I had never met before buttonholed me. "When I got half-way through *Ammonite*, I got really pissed off!" he said. I sighed and asked why he thought that was. "Because I was lied to!" By whom, I wanted to know. "The publishers! The back cover copy never said a word about the book being about women!"

He was pretty hot up. I asked him if he had finished the book. "Yes, I liked it. It's just that, well," he looked vaguely puzzled, "I was misled. . . ." I pointed out patiently that the only person doing the misleading had been himself: the back cover copy did not lie. It talked about security forces, and natives, and deadly viruses. The only pronouns used were *they* and *them*. If he went ahead and assumed that meant men, he had no one to blame but himself, had he? After all, women are human. We are people, too.

That man wandered off, not terribly convinced. Deep inside he knows—though he may not know that this is what he knows—that people are really *men*. Women are just, well, women: the also-ran, the other, the alien.

This is what he-man language does, this is how it survives today when it is demonstrably unfair, inefficient, and unnecessary. It forms part of a feedback loop: men (and women) condemn women as Other every time they say "mankind." They may not mean to, but motivation doesn't matter. The result is the same. What we hear is less than human.

The very words we all use build a hierarchy in our heads and women always come in second. As a result of that internal hierarchy, we find it harder to point to the naked ridiculousness of he-man language. Which reinforces the hierarchy. Woman as Other becomes embedded in our very language. We become alien in our own tongue.

Thank You!

WE PRINT STORIES ABOUT DARK futures and dystopias in *Terra Incognita*—stories of cynicism, disaster, and despair. But good things happen, too; the world as we do know it can be a truly wonderful place.

There are a lot of generous people in the world, and I was lucky enough to know several of them while I worked on *TI*. These people shared what they had to offer without worrying about what they might get in return.

Though busy with one of the very best speculative-fiction magazines, Meg Hamel, publisher of *Century*, took time out to give me lots and lots of essential advice about production and design.

So did Warren Lapine, editor of *Absolute Magnitude*. Without his energy and encouragement, I would not have gotten the magazine you're holding into your hands.

George Scithers, *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* publisher, is one of the most generous people I know, multiple Hugo Award-winner and founding editor of Isaac Asimov's *Science Fiction Magazine*. George did not hesitate to share his wisdom about magazine publishing.

Information on how you can get *Absolute Magnitude*, *Century*, and *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* appears on page 25.

There's simply not room to mention individually all those who helped: the Philadelphia Area SFF&H Writers' Workshop; Lee Ellen Marvin; all the people who contributed writing and art; and my arlts, brainy parents and brother and all my friends are just a few. And, of course, there is the devoted, patient, hard-working *TI* staff—especially Cati Coe, whose presence in my life has enabled this magazine and so much more.

—Jan Berrien Berends

TI

Jukebox City

by Eric Sonstroem

Illustrated by Christopher Angelucci

IT ALL STARTED WITH THE NOISE. IT WAS LATE, SO I HAD unzipped myself into my wall, listening to the beat—my body following the bass down in wider and wider circles; my mind riding up after that flute-sound, thinner and thinner. You'll know exactly what I mean if you're a Fresh-Tee. But no matter how you hear it, no matter who provides your wire service, imagine me, already half asleep, when—*Bam!*—I'm wide awake again, blinking and stupid. After a couple beats, I realized it was a Noise.

I'm no fool. I've heard Noises before. We all remember playing Noise Tragedy Rescue Team when we were kids and learning the Ten Emergency Noises. I even heard the Fire Noise once for real: When the DeiCorp tower burned four years ago, I was in the checkout line at a nearby Kwik-Jiff. I remember how scared I was then. But *this* Noise scared me twice as much. Why? Because it wasn't one of the Ten! *Bam!* Do you hear me? I knew it was Noise because it just hung there, not part of the music, not connected to anything at all. But I also knew I'd never heard it before. As far as I could hear, it was a sound . . . but it meant absolutely nothing.

I must have been getting really scared, because suddenly there's this big, warm string fade, real fat, and a nice slow back beat comes kicking in, smooth and mellow. Yeah. I recognize the beat right away; it's one of my favorites. I usually slide into it around the fourth hour of my shift—almost time to eat. So my stomach starts rumbling and I'm following these two fuzzy guitars, dancing around each other up high. They reminded me of two big, fluffy birds, playing around as they fly, and they're dodging and spiraling so playfully that I'm sure I forgot all about the Noise.

I'm all set to follow them down the path the beat's laid out when—*Bam!*—I hear that Noise again, louder this time, right out of nowhere. It's like tripping on the mallway curb and falling on your face.

I unzipped myself from the wall. As the lights blinked on, I started smelling for smoke. I know . . . stupid, because it wasn't the Fire Noise. Still, when you're scared, you start questioning everything, so part of me was wondering if maybe this *was* one of the Ten Noises which I'm just not recognizing, or if maybe there's supposed to be Eleven Noises. Then I felt all cold as another explanation started to hit, the only other one I could think of. My right hand rose instinctively to touch the flat, warm protrusion above my left nipple. Maybe there was something wrong with my wire.

I know, I know. Can't happen, you say. Take it from me. It can. I've searched it. Did you know that you can go insane in less than five minutes if your wire starts cutting out on you? Without anything to help you understand them, your thoughts break free like a whirlwind. You could look at something, a can of Flavor-Vista for example, and one thought might say, "Mmmm, I like Flavor-Vista," while another one pops up and says, "No, maybe I like Co-Colsoda better."

Even if you figure out which brand you prefer, you still might not know how thirsty you are, or which specific flavor you want. We take our wires for granted, but it's really amazing how much your wire watches out for you. Can you hear it, feeling thirsty and not thirsty at the same time? Can you even begin to hear one thought telling you to have Tropical Bubble Crunch and another one telling you to have Citri-Fizz, and there you are, trying to decide?

It gets even worse. If you ever find yourself in total silence (*Preserve us, Mr. D??*), your brain, they say, actually starts eating itself. Your thoughts start popping around so fast and strong that some of them begin to stand out all on their own, like a guitar playing itself without a program or anything. Your thoughts become as real as things, and you can even start thinking thoughts about the thoughts themselves! Your brain might start asking, "What was that thought I just

thought?" or "What do I think about that thought?" Remember what you learned in Action Body Assault Corps? *The human brain is a powerful source of energy, like a plasma cell. The right equipment can help channel this energy and make the brain one of your most valuable tools. However, like the plasma cell, if the brain is left alone it will short out from its own excess of uncontrolled energy.* I never really believed it as a kid, pumping my edu-tokens into the ABAC machine at the arcade, but I did now, and it terrified me.

Bam! Damn! But I shook my head and tried to calm down. In spite of the Noise, my wire was still on line. It had been trying out a few different beats and finally clicked in on a light and easy one, real smooth, like it's a sunny morning and nothing's wrong. I tried to relax into it, but I couldn't. I knew I'd heard the Noise and, strangely, I didn't want to forget it. By chance, my eye caught the Flavor-Vista icon on my wallbox, and the bass started popping around the half beat to show me how thirsty I was. I wiped my brow and realized that a cool drink would calm my nerves, thankful that I still could tell when I was thirsty. I opened the box and popped a can of Strawberry Twist.

I've bought Flavor-Vista ever since I became a Fresh-Tee (Fresh Touch provides my extended wire service), and it had always been fine. Try to hear my surprise when I started drinking this can and it was warm and flat, like weak, dirty sugar water. Looking inside the can, I saw some kind of cloudy, whitish liquid. A thought flashed through, a quick jump that surely had nothing to do with my wire. And before I quite knew what I was doing I'd grabbed and popped open a can of Lime Paradise and was staring into it at the same warm, cloudy stuff.

My wire started laying on a real heavy beat in $\frac{3}{4}$, a primal training one from my earliest memories, and I was dancing around the room before I remembered the soda again. I looked into the first can I'd popped and, sure enough, it was clear and red, with little bubbles fizzing to the top. The second can was green and fizzy.

Seeing them changed like that scared me. It scared me even more than hearing the Noise. I started to wonder if the problem was actually in me—in my brain, not my wire. How else could you explain what had happened with the soda? How else could you explain the fact that I'd opened that second can anyway?

Bam! I was really worried now. The wire was kicking a variation on that same primal beat which (*Thank you, Mr. DJ!*) was helping to push the fear out of my mind. It was also making my feet want to move, and I realized that going for a walk outside might bring me back to the groove. I grabbed my coat—hand whipped out, fingers clutched, arm drew back, arm in, arm in, shoulder, shoulder, snap, snap, snap, all in perfect sync with the beat—and I was out the door and on my way. Into the cool night air. Yeah. Night air

music, and night breeze from the whisper fans set in the ceiling of the street. Sync. I was in sync.

Once I stepped into the concourse though, it seemed like everyone was looking at me, like I was out of step or something. There was something about their faces, about their eyes, that was sharper, somehow more distinct. But no, I'm not off the beat. I'm right on the floor. Couldn't be righter.

As I walked down the familiar street, past the uni-dormers and poly-dormers, past the brightly lit shops with windows full of familiar, flashing icons, I began to feel more myself. My feet hit the tiles with a solid thump thump, and my arms swung in perfect counterpoint. You know how comforting it is, to see and feel the city dance all around you, to know that you're part of that dance, in perfect sync, moving in perfect harmony with sixty million other dancers. Each step I took sent a shock wave upward through my whole frame, soothing away my uneasiness.

My eye caught the mirrored entrance to an arcade half way up the block, and I thought, what the Hellvis, maybe if I played a round or two of Noise Tragedy Rescue Team I could convince myself what I'd heard was OK. I put my hand into the scanner outside the service window and keyed "I'd like two tokens, please," my selected voice rapping my request over the attendant's wire. She handed me my tokens, and I stepped inside.

The arcade seemed too crowded for a Thursday night, but then again, I hadn't been in one in years. Like the man says, "The tempo slides when the date-clock rides." I got that same weird feeling like everyone was looking at me, but this time they probably were—I was a little old to be a student. One kid in particular gave me a half amused smile and looked like he was going to key me something, when his eyes slipped back over and he was back in his game. My wire was pumping down a heavy, old-style synth track to sync with the retro feel of the flashing neon sculptures hanging from the walls. I stepped up to one of the machines, popped in my first token, and keyed up NTRT.

The screen faded in around my head, and I saw the opening scenes which explained, in animated cells, how the game is played and how the scoring works. I clicked on OK, and in the next instant I was navigating my rescue chopper over the roofs of the city, hitting target Noises with the appropriate emergency response fields. A small window to my left showed the points I was racking up. You never lose your touch, they say, and it's true, because before long I'm heading for real bonus territory. My wire started kicking all grand and triumphant, like this was the answer to all my questions, like I finally found what I was searching for. For a second I believed it, feeling a wave of relief wash over me like a majestic guitar solo.

Then *Bam! Bam!* I'm not sure if it was the Noise again or just a memory of it, but it kicked me out of that groove in



an instant, and I'm standing there feeling frustrated and confused, scared and angry. I left the game machine still running, flashing symbols that meant *Extra Bonus! Extra Bonus!* but I didn't care.

I ran to the harsh fluorescence of the bathroom and splashed water on my face from the sink. The mirror shot me back an image that was supposed to be my face, smiling, looking all calm and collected, but I was sure it was a video file that my wire had transmitted to the mirror in order to calm me down. The last thing I remember, I was trying to smash the mirror screen, punching at it again and again, dark blood from my fists running down its sleek, clean surface and dripping into the sink.

My wire led me out of there—out past the four walls of the bathroom and into the central corridor of the mall, rising high above a sea of smiling and laughing faces, ruddy, sharp, and clear. Part of me was aware that this was just a sample track of happy crowd sounds sliding in under the main beat, maybe recorded in the lobby of a Stimucade Arena after a good show, but this part of me was fading, dissolving into the intricacies of the branching synth lines coming down from above. Suddenly I was floating up through the branches of the flowering synth lines coming down from above. Suddenly I was floating up through the branches of the flowering synth lines coming down from above. Suddenly I was floating up through the branches of the flowering synth lines coming down from above. Suddenly I was floating up through the branches of the flowering synth lines coming down from above. Suddenly I was floating up through the branches of the flowering synth lines coming down from above.

Then the beat was longer, stronger, wider, and the sound of horns fell over it, cascading down in cathedral spires. I could feel my physical body falling away in fragments, falling away as easily as the horns cascaded down the rising beat, and I could feel my dream self breaking clear, expanding, like some marvelous hatchling that dries off and takes wing immediately, never having to touch ground before springing into miraculous flight. I could feel the stars come closer, shining into me and through me with their cold, clear light. I saw the inverted bowl of the city beneath me, smiling up at me, its lights warm and inviting. The city was nesting me, cradling me. I was home again. Like the man said, "My life was saved by rock and roll."

That was three weeks ago, and now I'm altogether back on track. Fresh Touch sent some techs out to my dormer to run my wire through its diagnostics, and it came out clean. They also ran a full psych profile on me and—*Praise the MC!*—I came out clean too. The techs told me not to worry about what happened. Certain brains, they said, certain otherwise *healthy* brains, build up an excess of a certain kind of fluid from time to time. "Creativity" means your conglom represents lots of "off-beat" products, but it used to mean this brain fluid. It can make you see things or hear Noises

that aren't there, but it's harmless, an evolutionary holdover like an appendix or vocal chords or hair.

Since then things have been great. I'm even in love. I was eating in a Kwofly-Stop, and whenever my eyes passed over hers, my wire started kicking in all funky and sultry. Of course her wire was doing the same thing, so when our eyes finally met, well, like the man says, we made beautiful music together.

She's a Merc-Tone, which makes sense because Fresh Touch and Mercury Tone have been planning a merger for the past few months. They already represent many of the same companies. I was glad to learn that Flavor-Vista is one they have in common, because today we went shopping to stock the wallbox in our new poly-dormer!

I love my wire!

||

Father of a Bomb

The old and gentle man who taught us
to trespass on our dreams into mushroomed reality
Never thought it would get that big, that powerful
but he had resolved
that science wouldn't/couldn't change the corruptible species
absolutely—some are left wailing in
the darkness, bitter burned, kimonoes signaturred into flesh
hatred etched into quiet minds and father-time
gathering up the lost children in his arms
and chides those who have stolen the formulas, taken the
cryptic codes—knowledge from wiser gods and the gentle man know now
some things are best left undiscovered . . .

—Nancy Bennett

Writers and Artists, Send for Our Guidelines!

Writers and artists who want to submit to us should get a copy of our Contributors' Guidelines. Just send a #10 SASE to:

Terra Incognita
52 Windermere Avenue #3
Lansdowne PA 19050-1812.

Individuals outside the US should send an envelope and one IRC (available from your post office). We will not respond to requests which are not accompanied by a return envelope and adequate postage. You can also request an electronic copy of our Guidelines by writing to incognit@netaxs.com. Our e-Guidelines aren't quite as fancy as the printed ones, but they have all the same information—and you won't have to bother with envelopes!

Here's what one person had to say about our Contributors' Guidelines: "I want you to know that, of the dozens of guidelines I've received, yours is the clearest, most reasonable, most specific, and most succinct I've ever seen. In addition, it is well laid out."

(And they're free!)

Octavia E. Butler Mouths Off!

An Interview

by Tasha Kelly and Jan Berrien Berends

We met with Octavia E. Butler in New York City, and we quickly discovered that, in addition to being one of the all too few black woman sf writers, she is also jolly, serene, and generous. And, as she makes abundantly clear in the following interview, Butler is a deep thinker. No doubt, this attribute, as much as any, has enabled her to create so many wonderful stories. (And for those of you who haven't been lucky enough to discover Butler's fiction, a bibliography her works appears toward the end.)

COMMUNITY BUILDING & SOCIAL STABILITY

Terra Incognita: We find that a very strong sense of community building permeates your work.

Octavia E. Butler: It's not something I was fully aware of when I began to write. I noticed that, the way I've lived, I've always had a little community of people around me that I've known. Instead of not having any idea of who the neighbors are, I've generally known them. Where I live right now is a tiny community, a court. It's six little houses back from the street, and I'm the sixth one. We all know each other, and if we're not home, we look out for each other's cats and each other's house and that sort of thing. It's very comfortable. Where I used to live, we got to know each other because we were getting burglarized quite a lot. We set up a neighborhood-watch group. I was surprised that there were people who would not take part in it. I never understood why.

TI: This seems to crop up a bit in *Parable of the Sower*.

OEB: There are always going to be people who do that. They have their own reasons. They're the ones who figure that someone else is supposed to do this. Or they figure you are just trying to get something out of them that they don't want to give. And there are always just the anti-social people.

TI: People in denial.

OEB: Yeah: frightened people. Where I used to live, in Los Angeles, where the burglaries were happening, my landlady was retired and had plenty of time, but she would never take any part in the neighborhood-watch group. I rented a duplex, and she was right next door, but she wouldn't participate. The truth was that, in spite of the fact that she was a surprisingly abrasive person, she was very shy. She would not take part, but she would come and ask me if I knew the workman who did a really good job on someone else's house. She'd lived there for twenty

years longer than I had, and she would come to ask me if I knew a workman who's done a nice job! And it's just because I know the other neighbors.

TI: Actually, that brings to mind the fact that, in your stories, there's often someone who chooses not to face the intensity of the story's issue or problem. Some overburdening thing has been occurring or is about to occur, and it's only going to get worse, and many characters just can't take it. In contrast, your protagonists are very clear-sighted; they always want to face the truth.

OEB: Not necessarily "want to," but more like "have to."

TI: But the protagonist definitely seems concerned with bringing together either a small group of people or the beginnings of a larger community in the face of apocalypse.

OEB: In the *Patternist* stories, it's happening by coercion, practically. People are being dragged together. But in *Parable of the Sower*, it happens

because one person is going somewhere. The others, they're not drawn to Lauren, the protagonist, in some magnetic way. People just gradually join up.

TI: They follow her purpose a little bit?

OEB: Yes. At least they attach themselves to someone or something that seems purposeful. Meanwhile they may well be snickering about it. In a way, the religion Lauren creates is silly, and she recognizes that, but she also believes in it. A lot of the things we believe are silly. They may also be true. Lauren has to deal with that. "How can I be talking about space when here we are trying to get enough food to eat and not get killed?"

TI: Let's talk about Lauren's religion. First of all, as I understand it, the poems in *Parable of the Sower* were written by you independently?

OEB: Not independently—not quite; I was having a lot of trouble writing *Parable of the Sower*. It took me three years to get to the point of being able to write it. One of the problems I was having—one of several—was boredom. I kept writing things in the same way that I had written them before. New writers tend to rewrite what they've read from other people, while old writers tend to rewrite they're own stuff. It was really getting to me. As a matter of fact, the same thing happened when I was writing the *Xenogenesis* books. At first, I set those on another planet, and I thought, "This is starting to sound so familiar." I had to work to bring it back to Earth just so it wouldn't be so familiar, which is an odd thing to have to do. With *Parable of the Sower*, I don't know, it just took me a long time to get away from what I had been doing all along, and one of the ways to get away from it was to write the verses. I knew that I wanted Lauren to create this religion. When I asked myself, what sort

of religion it would be—what would she believe in—the answer was fairly obvious.

I'm kind of a self-help book addict. Unfortunately, talk about change is so clichéd now that nobody really hears you when you're saying it. Every politician is saying it, and all they really mean is, "Let's have change and more power for me and less for you." When I started talking about change, I felt fine about what I was saying. Then the election came along, and I started to wonder if everyone would just assume that I was parroting the candidates or something, back when *Parable of the Sower* came out. I did worry about that.

The verses really got me going because they were so different. I had never done anything like that before. They got me writing in a way that I had not been writing before.

TI: The book does feel different.

OEB: Good.

ON WRITING, REWRITING, & REWRITING AGAIN

TI: In *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren's father says, "Live, that's all anybody can do right now. Live. Hold out. Survive." But, Lauren says, "He's right, but he doesn't go far enough. God is change and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn't enough for us to just survive, limping along playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. . . . There has to be more that we can do. . . ."

Does this reflect a shift in your own thinking?

OEB: I think it was more like sitting down and figuring out what made sense to me, and putting those words into her mouth. I did not want her to come up with a philosophy that was stupid. I wanted her to come up with something that I could have been converted to.

It had to be something that sounded sensible to me.

If you write fiction, you get to the point where you feel you are repeating yourself, and you don't want to do that anymore. It's more than that, though. Your way of writing can change. Mine has. A lot of my early work, my early novels, were novels that came to me, at least as ideas, while I was still in my teens or in college. I wrote one novel in kind of the way that writing teachers encourage you to write. I outlined it; I did all this stuff. I really hated writing like that. The novel never worked, but I couldn't let it go. There's a stubborn streak here. I think I mention it in *Bloodchild* and *Other Stories*. There's a story in there called "Near of Kin." I wrote it very badly when I was in college, but I couldn't let go of it. The teacher was reading stories aloud and read that one. It was so embarrassing. I thought, "Oh God, I want to leave the class and never come back." On the other hand, I could not drop the story, so I kept writing it until someone bought it.

The same thing happened with the novel. I kept writing it until someone bought it. Nobody published it though. I took it back because I realized it was really not a good novel. It was better for me not to outline things and go through the writing-teacher routine because it bored me. I'd get so bored having written the outline, that I wouldn't want to write the story as I had outlined it.

Ironically, now, I almost *hate* to do something like an outline. This is the change that I was talking about. With *Parable of the Sower*, I wrote it many times. I made lots of beginnings—anything from fifty to a hundred and fifty pages, whatever—and they didn't work. Some of them I actually sent to my agent. They were just me trying to avoid what

Lauren is going through, in a way. I wrote from the point of view of her daughter. (The daughter isn't even born in *Parable of the Sower*, but Lauren will have a daughter eventually.) I wrote from the point of view of her husband. I wrote from the point of view of her in an earlier stage of her life as a quite different sort of person. When I lived in Los Angeles, I saw a lot of street people, of course. I wrote from the point of view of her as a young street person trying to survive and gradually coming up with all this, and I frankly didn't believe it, because in real life too much would be happening to her that was really awful for her to be sitting around and thinking, "Well, I think my philosophy is . . ." It's more like, "Gee, I wish I could get away from these guys and get some food."

RELIGION & THE FUTURE

TI: Not a lot of sf heroes use religion to save the universe.

OEB: I'm not trying to use it to save the universe. I'm trying to give it to my characters as a tool to help them save themselves. The universe—nobody is going to save that. It's a matter of a group of people getting together to do what they can for themselves. Because they *can't* save the world; they can't save their country; they can't save their families, for goodness sake!

I'm working on *Parable of the Talents*, right now, and because the news played such an important part in *Parable of the Sower*, I wanted to go on with it in *Parable of the Talents* and come up with more good solutions as opposed to just problems. But, what I find myself doing is looking at the ways we're going now, the ways we're going politically. For example: privatization. I don't know if this is going to make any sense to you, but over a hundred years ago,

the Confederacy was dissolved. Today, there are people who are trying to revive it—you know, bring states' rights to such a point that states are almost little countries. That seems really stupid. Also, I've been very interested in reading things from World War II and just before it, because I'm very interested in how a country goes fascist. It seems like we're either going to break up or go really crazy in another direction.

You look at some place like Bosnia, where all three peoples are essentially the same people—they have different religions and they have divided themselves up over history, but really they are the same people. You would think one group was from Mars, the other Venus, and the other Jupiter, or something, the way they're killing each other.

TI: Do you think some sort of apocalypse is coming for the states?

OEB: Oh, probably. It usually is. It's not like I'm saying the end of everything is about to come. It's just a matter of human beings doing this to themselves every now and then. They build and build and build . . . and then they crash. I used to say that another crash was coming, but I stopped saying it because people thought I meant a 1930s-style economic crash, that the stock market was going to go down. No, no, no. The stock market almost doesn't matter in what I'm talking about—a kind of population crash where we just do so much to ourselves, to the Earth, to the structures that preserve us. I've been talking a lot, in my talks about *Bloodchild* and *Other Stories*, about the disintegrating health-care system and educational system—libraries close, schools get less and less in some cases, and colleges cost more and more and offer less, and that kind of thing—and it just seems like we're doing more to bring it about in the name of saving money. [Laughs.] It's not funny, but

what's strange to me is the fact that people buy it.

I was at a convention last year; I was part of a panel with some long, academic title. The convention was a kind of hybrid: at academic conventions you come and read papers, and at fan conventions you enjoy yourself. At this, you didn't exactly read papers, but you discussed "important things"—as opposed to sex with aliens or vampirism as a sexual experience. There was this one panel about on "Our Changing Society," and somebody stood up in the back and said, "We've got to get rid of all these taxes; they aren't getting us anything." And there we were, sitting in a tax-supported university, and one that was having some problems.

They had given me chair of the panel, so I figured I could do things. And I said, "Look, right now you're sitting in one of the results of your taxes." She just seemed frustrated that I didn't understand and she went on to something else. There was a young black man in there who was trying to get us all to understand that Newt Gingrich was the new savior, and *that* was more horrifying than any of the others.

It's gotten very strange. Part of it I kind of blame on previously degraded education. People have not really learned to reason, and they hear something and they just say, "Sounds good to me—"

TI: Rhetoric is more important than understanding.

OEB: Exactly.

TI: Since we seem to be moving toward this breakdown, do you think there's any hope?

OEB: We will probably wind up building something back up. I don't know what, though; nor do I know when. We don't have an insurance policy that says we have to survive as what we are now. We don't have to be something recognizable later on.

TI: Do you think that the idea of a new religion—one aimed at stabilizing society—would be good or bad?

OEB: I think it could be both very easily. For instance, my mother has lived a very hard and unpleasant life and religion was all she had. She was taken out of school at a very young age and put to work, so she didn't have education to fall back on; and she's a very shy woman, so she didn't have friends to fall back on; and her family all went their separate ways, so she didn't have *them* to fall back on. All she had was Jesus. It kept her sane; it kept her going. She was there for me because she had Jesus.

TI: We noticed that Lauren doesn't break from Baptism entirely in the book.

OEB: Well, she doesn't say, "Oh, you're all fools."

TI: She finds value in the Bible.

OEB: Where she finds value in it is in the ethical system and the metaphors.

In fact, I've had her religion called "warmed-over Christianity." I've had it called "warmed-over Buddhism." You name it.

GENDER & LEADERSHIP

TI: You present strong, self-assured female protagonists, of course. They're not the old-fashioned reactionary protagonists.

OEB: Very few people are these days. Nobody is writing about those non-people.

TI: There also seem to be two distinct types of men, usually. There are strong, brave, and reliable men—who are usually handsome. At the same time, there's usually some sort of a sexual exploitation going on with the characters. In *Parable of the Sower* and in "Speech Sounds," for instance, there are men who try to keep harems of women.

OEB: There is something, though, that I wasn't all that clear about, in *Par-*

able of the Sower in particular. There's the guy who has a harem, and naturally there are jealousies and all that, but the woman who was his youngest wife—she loved him! I mean, if she had wanted to—knowing what she knew about the outside world—she could have left, though it would not have been to her advantage to do it.

I know people who live in either group marriage or polygamous marriage situations, and they do it

through choice. So I recognize that there are people for whom this is the way to live.

TI: How about the "Bloodchild" protagonist? He's somebody different. Unlike many of the men in your stories, he's somewhat passive.

OEB: He's not passive; he's busy growing up.

TI: He winds up becoming the reproductive vehicle for T'Gatoi, a bug-like alien. Is this a choice he makes, or is he forced?

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New York, 1995

\$18.00 HC; 145 pages

Stories: "Bloodchild," "The Evening and the Morning and the Night," "Near of Kin," "Speech Sounds," and "Crossover." Essays: "Puritive Obsession" and "Furor Scribendi."

Kindred
Beacon Press, Boston, 1988
TPB; 264 pages

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Warner Books, New York, 1995
PB; 304 pages

THE XENOGENESIS SERIES

Note: All the books in this series are being reissued by Warner, and are scheduled to be released in 1997. Dates of original publication appear in parentheses.

Dawn
Warner Books, New York 1997 (1987)
PB; 256 pages

Adultbood Rites
Warner Books, New York 1997 (1987)
PB; 304 pages

Imago
Warner Books, New York, 1997 (1989)
PB; 224 pages

THE PATTERNIST SERIES

Note: The books in the Patternist series are listed in order of original publication (for which Warner was not responsible). The date of original publication appears in parentheses. The order of publication has nothing to do with the internal chronology of the books.

Patternmaster
Warner Books, New York, 1995 (1976)
PB; 208 pages

Mind of My Mind
Warner Books, New York, 1994 (1977)
PB; 224 pages

Survivor (1978)
Out of print—and Butler vows that it will remain that way!

Wild Seed
Warner Books, New York, 1988 (1980)
PB; 288 pages

Clay's Ark
Warner Books, New York 1996 (1984)
PB; 224 pages

Many thanks to the Van Pelt library of the University of Pennsylvania for assistance in compiling this bibliography.

OEB: It is a choice. It's a choice that he makes for more than one reason. When he realizes that his sister might wind up doing it, he suddenly realizes *he* wants it. Somebody said the other day, "Oh, he's doing it to save his sister." No, not really. He's doing it to save something for himself.

TI: What is it he wants for himself?

OEB: T'Gatoi.

TI: He has real feelings for T'Gatoi?

OEB: She helped to raise him. He knows her. He's been around her all his life. That was the whole purpose. For somebody that was partly raised by the Tlic (it's hard to say without spitting on people) the nice thing is that it isn't a matter of coercion. It's a matter of affection, and of fear, of course: the kind of emotions that ought to be in play here.

I've had so many people think it's slavery. One person even got angry with me because I said, "No, that's not what I had in mind."

TI: A lot of your female protagonists are so self-assured and so strong.

OEB: But they're not especially strong. They certainly have their doubts and fears.

TI: At the same time, the women are usually the strong ones, the leaders. They are the ones who say, "This is the way it's got to be."

OEB: But you're inside of them, too; you're hearing their thoughts. The reason they come off so strong is that they're taking a leadership role. If somebody is a leader, she wants to at least appear to know what she's doing. Otherwise, why would anyone follow her?

TI: Lauren's religion is quite attractive. I can imagine people willing to follow it.

OEB: The problem is that, once anybody gets into it, they start to fiddle with it.

TI: Lauren is concerned about that. She doesn't want too much mysticism to be introduced.

OEB: But she knows perfectly well, or she *should* know perfectly well, that it will be. Her male friend knows.

He was a problem in *Parable of the Talents* because, early on, I wanted to get rid of him. I thought, "Geez, he's an old man. He's probably going to die soon. I'll just have him die and that will be that." And then I wrote a very bad novel—for that reason and for some other reasons even more important than that.

One of the things I realized I had to do was put him in a more mentoring role, instead of just killing him off because he's an old man who has already contributed something. He is turning into a much more interesting character to me now because, as a mentor, he's a bit dangerous to Lauren. People do tend to follow older, well-educated men, and here's this young girl with these ideas.

PERUVIAN MACAWS & THE GENESIS OF *Xenogenesis*

TI: We wanted to find out about your thinking behind the *Xenogenesis* books. One very striking thing—noticeable as early as the first book, *Dawn*—is the idea about hierarchy.

OEB: That was one of the basic ideas for the series. Hierarchy is not a flaw unless intelligence is put at its service. That's why the aliens in *Xenogenesis* say we humans are born with a built-in self-destruct. These ideas were kind of rattling around in my head when I went to Peru to research the *Xenogenesis* books and something happened there—it was kind of funny, really—that solidified them. I went to some of the national parks in Peru where they haven't torn up the rainforest.

One of the things I noticed at one of these parks was two flocks of macaws, scarlet and blue. Now, these were wild birds, but they were accustomed to tourists feeding them. As a

matter of fact, they would come over and pinch you on the ear if you didn't feed them. When you have a bird that is perfectly willing—even though it's a wild bird—to sit on your head or your shoulder and give your ear a good tweak, that's interesting.

But what got me about the birds was that what they did when they flew in every day, if the tourists weren't feeding them, was squabble over who got top perch. They carried on so loudly that the first time I heard them I thought somebody was torturing the birds, or shooting them, or something. I went out to look, and all they were doing was fighting for the top perch. I watched for a while, and that's all they did. Unless somebody came with food, they fought over the top perch, and no bird was ever there for more than a few seconds. It seemed like the perfect shadow of humanity.

In *The Chimps of Gomori*, by Jane Goodall, there's an incident that stays with me. The chimps in the big troupe split up into two smaller groups. One group went to one part of the preserve and another group went to the other part. The larger group made war systematically over a long period of time on the smaller group and wiped them out. The thought before was that they wouldn't be likely, for instance, to wipe out the females, but they did: genocide. It reminded me a lot of Bosnia, when I began hearing more about what was going on there. Here were chimps who were *relatively* busy wiping each other out.

TI: So it's not just humans.

OEB: Almost nothing is just us. I was on a panel once with a guy who kept saying that since we couldn't prove that animals had feelings we had to assume that people who attributed feelings to animals were anthropomorphizing.

I said, "What are we talking about here, special creation? Did we just

pop into existence with everything we've got and it didn't come from any place?" He felt that he was being scientific, and I tried to point out that he *wasn't*.

TI: In the *Xenogenesis* trilogy, were you comparing the humans—who were in the position of either assimilating with the aliens or dying out—with the slave trade?

OEB: No, not at all. What I have the aliens doing is being very moral to their point of view. That's why, when the little boy in *Adulthood Rites* comes along and suggests that the aliens should let some of the people go and live on Mars, the aliens say, "How can we? They'd kill themselves, and that's wrong." I was doing a lot of things there. For one thing, I was responding to Ronald Reagan. He talked about winnable nuclear wars, and how if we just had more nuclear weapons we'd be safer and all that. The odd thing is that, if he were running now, he wouldn't be conservative enough! Isn't that scary?

THE POLITICAL SEE-SAW

TI: There's so much political pendulum-swinging.

OEB: But it never swings very far left. It did during the sixties, a little bit. The sixties were thirty years ago, but now we're falling apart instead of figuring out ways to come away.

I've been running around talking about this as the decade of disintegration.

TI: End-of-the-millennium doom-saying?

OEB: No, it's not a matter of the calendar. It's just what we do. We seem

to have this strange, thirty-year cycle, but even if we didn't, we'd have big swings, whether they took thirty years or not.

I kind of used the idea of the thirty-year cycle in the early version—the one that did not succeed—of *Parable of the Talents*. There would be a period of activism, of chaos—not activism in one specific direction or another, but just all this upheaval.

And then there would be this period of weariness, of disillusionment, which I called "Ashes." That's like the 70s, where we looked back and said, "But we wanted to do so much, and so little was done."

And then you get a period of reaction, the 80's, where everybody decides, "It's time to get back to the good old days when we were on top and everybody knew who they were. Blah, blah, blah."

Usually, people then return to activism after trying to get back to the good old days. It happened for us too, a little bit. But now we are stuck with some of the things that we did during that period of reaction. The national debt, for instance. So, the debt winds up being the excuse to get rid of other things that we really need.

NITTY GRITTY

TI: You won the MacArthur Fellowship. Do you know what you are going to be doing with it?

OEB: Well, the way things have been going... it's a good thing! It's always nice to know that you are actually going to be able to live no matter

what others do. It'll be very nice to have it to fall back on. I haven't had a regular check coming in for about twenty-five years. I've been freelancing for that long. It will be nice to know that it *is* coming, and there's a specific amount each quarter.

TI: So, now you are working on another book, *Parable of the Talents*, a sequel to *Parable of the Sower*. One unusual thing about Lauren's religion is that she has this faith in a space program of sorts. It's hard to imagine getting from *Parable of the Sower* to a viable space program.

OEB: Not really. *She* doesn't have to do it, after all. All she has to do is encourage it.

This is something that I had to realize: No, Lauren doesn't have to become an engineer or a scientist and get a space program going. All she has to do is focus people, give them purpose. John Kennedy didn't know much about getting rockets into space.

TI: So, do you have another book in mind? A third in the *Parable* series?

OEB: I had wanted to explore the possibilities of the religion. I don't know if that's what I'm going to do next. Religions can go in so many directions, and that fascinates me. I'm not sure who else it will fascinate, and I'm not sure what I'm going to do with that. A funny thing about *Parable of the Sower*, the first book: it began as, believe it or not, some sort of thought experiment with the Gaia hypothesis. You wouldn't believe that from where it is now, but I kind of want to go back to that idea and see what I want to do with it.

II

Stuff You Should Be Reading

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123 Crooked Lane

King of Prussia PA 19406-2570

one copy—\$5.00; one year—\$16.00

Judgementality

by Kandis Elliot

Illustrated by Keith Minnion

STATE STREET: LINKING MAD TOWN'S CAPITOL (LARGEST unsupported cement dome in the world) and campus (largest cloning of dope-taking weenies) and about as Bohemian as you can get in what used to be the liberal armpit of the Midwest. Line it with Third World ptomaine palaces serving everything from baklava to dagoburgers, add money-clogged college kids and politically correct, nuke-a-gay-whale-for-Jesus freaks, mix with fascist numb-nuts and out-on-bail crazies.

Madison ain't New York. No John Lennon getting blown away in public, but every now and again we get a weirdness murder, like that skeleton found all mummified, stuffed in a chimney of the used-record store, who was wearing women's clothes but it was a man-skeleton, with its pelvis broken in four places and with two pairs of socks, one pair on the feet and the other stuffed in its Victoria's Secret bra. Never found out who he was—or whodunit—but geez, some gorilla-sized john gropes under that dress and finds something he ain't expecting and hey, no big mystery there.

As I say, we got weirdness, and the crack scene is just about here and all the gang stuff that *that's* going to bring, but right now we're pretty tame in our own little unreal way, so that's why I notice: Jake the Window-Slosher, Gloria Goodtimes, and the Towelman are missing.

As of yesterday nobody I asked laid eyes on the wino who appears on the corner by Vicky's Coffee Shop when the sun goes down and pretends to need just another quarter for the bus. And now I can't see Pete the Nam vet with the grenade-toast face, who always plays *The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald* on his five-string guitar whenever he sees me coming, and I always throw a dollar in his open case. He usually plays beneath my office window at the *Street Beat News*, and I listen to the whole song—the wives and the sons and the daughters—while I turn on my computer and get settled at my desk for the night. Not that I don't have to force myself to

listen since it stopped being sweet and started being a royal pain in the butt. Worse, the song heralds my arrival at the office, thus warning Stinking Tom to light up his horse turd before I march in.

Tonight, Stinking Tom gets a surprise and whirls his chair when I pop in. "Sammie!" he says. "Where the hell's your musical accompaniment?" He quick reaches in his layout board's art drawer for a cigar and lighter.

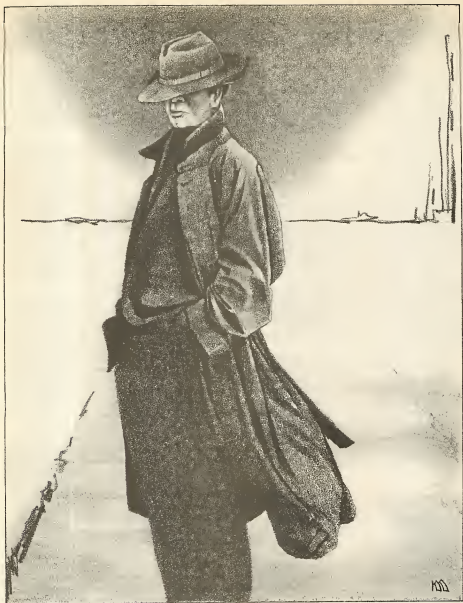
"Maybe Pete's sick tonight. But hark, Tom: no *Edmund*! What need to pollute my air in retribution?" I try to talk nice—why add to the world's degeneracy?—as I paw at a stack of manuscripts. Most are crap, illiterates living a writer's fantasy or English students who got an A on a class assignment and assume that means more than dink in the real newspaper world. I edit reporters' scrawls and feature columns that will get hidden among a gazillion ads. The *Street News* is a free ad-rag, 'cause who'd pay for it, my scintillating blue pencil notwithstanding?

As the sun outside the office window sets in unusual silence, blue smoke wafts toward the open screen and detours up my nostrils.

"Damn it, Tom!" I jump up and flip a wall switch. The vent fan begins a grinding drone. The sickening pall hesitates, begrudgingly leaves my workstation, and starts winding its way up to the ceiling vent. The noisy fan therein grates behind an untrustworthy guard made of four concentric plastic squares. Something about the device always reminds me of an Escher drawing. "When was the last time anybody bothered to clean the dust filter in that vent?" I ask nobody in particular.

"The last time Pete sang any song other than *Edmund Fitzgerald*." Tom answers me so he can blow more smoldering-dumpster aroma my way.

I work on the stack of manuscripts to the external growl of the dusty vent fan overhead, and to an internal,



maddening repetition of *Some lake, it is said, never gives up its dead* and other half-remember stanzas. After a while I long for the nightly serenade from the window. Tom also misses the live concert. When his cigar smolders its last, he starts to whistle.

I grind a fingernail. No vent, clogged filter or no, could cleanse the air of *that*.

"Tom," I say, "How would you like to visit our local professional harassers for a while?"

He looks up from an ad layout. "Thou mumblest at *moi*?"

"Bunch of 'em seem to be taking a vacation. I think you'd fit right in."

"Who's on vacation?"

"Besides Pete, there's Jake the Window-Slosher, Gloria McGillicuddy—"

Stinking Tom reaches for his gum package. "Gloria Goodtimes? That old whore's run off with Pete?"

"—And the Towelman; that's the guy who wears the towel like a diaper—" I watch five sticks of gum get unwrapped and inserted into Tom's mouth, and I brace myself for the dripping words I am going to hear for the next twenty minutes. "I haven't heard the Boom-Box Brother all week. Come to think of it, where's Unwashed Mary?"

"What're you (chomp, chomp) saying, our local gendarmes got out the official pooper-scooper (smack, chomp) and absconded with our local color?" Tom rolls his eyes along with the flavored-plastic bolus in his mouth. "Oh, what will the ol' hood do (chomp, slurp) for a tourist attraction now? Madison will be just another (chomp, chomp) college town!"

"Do you *have* to chew cud and talk at the same time?"

"Hey," he grins, sticks out a masticated gray gob between teeth, "let's have a little *tolerance* here. Ever hear yourself gnawing on your nails? Like a rat in the woodwork—" he starts with sound effects, "*snik snob klik clink*—"

"I wish the cops had a pooper-scooper to fit *you*." Normally I am not a gross person—clean-mouth-clean-mind I always say—but now I snatch up my carryall and stomp toward the door. "I'm going to Vicky's for coffee."

Tom giggles, and I hear him get up to turn the vent fan off.

I CHARGE DOWN State Street. As I say, it's Madison's just about only nightlife street—you discount the whore corners and a couple dives by the lake catering to beatnik-style degenerate hippy burnouts. Good old cheesy-tacky, ten-block artery loaded with suits from the domed Capitol, bouncy co-eds, grayhair professors actually smoking pipes, frat brothers leering at stiletto-heeled politico secretaries, sarape-wrapped foreigners, and high-school escapees dressed in rags made to look like newspapers previously used to wrap garbage.

I find myself bulbing for the street people I haven't seen in . . . how long? Not that I make it a habit to look for scum. I'm usually aiming for nicer sights, but I spot shadows in doorways and sitting on sidewalk tree planters, taking up stations for panhandling, pedestrian-watching, just plain existing. I'm not the only one who sees 'em, of course, it's just that most people on the promenade, doing evening shopping or bar-hopping or other activities requiring money and social status higher than concrete, don't make it a point to acknowledge street people. I'll bet maybe one in a hundred noticed the Towelman ain't been around for a week.

Where would he go? Where would any of them go? Why? I slow my four-block journey to the coffee shop. I avoid eye contact or else you get 'em sniffing at your wallet, and make a mental tally; maybe they're still here, but just a little more invisible than usual. All of 'em fight invisibility in their own way, know what I mean? Nam Pete sings; Boom-Box Brother booms; the Towelman smirks and does this mortifying little pelvic-thrust at people who flip quarters at his palm to buy a smug cheap hit of benevolence. I wonder, could it really be a police round-up of CMIs? I'd have to say that the only true chronically mentally ill, as opposed to crips, drools, and the ordinary stupid, were Jake the Window-Slosher and Unwashed Mary.

Set-free CMIs, see. Welfare gives 'em a dole, and head-up-their-ass social-rights bleeding hearts open the doors of institutional safe-havens and boot the slobs out on the street. Jake had been a boxer and is now a brain-punched deliric forgotten by fight fans, insurance companies, and union pensions. With a bucket and squeegee he sloshes windows all day for the price of a nightly gallon of Thunderbird. One night, I'd gone to the office window to investigate a thundering ruckus—I think someone is kicking a car or busting into the pet store for god-knows—and there I see Jake sparring with a mailbox. Punch, punch, and he's arguing with an invisible referee. Like I say, geez.

Unwashed Mary is an eighty-pound grandma-type who wears a brown, curly wig decrepit and snarled as a road-killed cat. She shuffles silent and incessant up and down State, hugging four shopping bags full of wads of clothes, like what people dump in front of the Goodwill doors at dawn so they can be anonymous, junking crap on charity. Mary can only carry two bags at one time, which she totes for one block, sets them down on the corner, then returns for the two she'd left a block back, brings these up to the waiting bags, takes those up another block, comes back for the pair left, and so on, up and down the streets. Never did hell offer an easier target for kids' pranks, but far as I know, nobody interfered with Mary's ritual. To filch or hide one of the waiting bags, the thief had to enter Unwashed Mary's aura. Touch something she touched. God forbid.

So Jake's gone. And Mary's gone.

So I'm bulbing for scum when I come up to the Folks SuperMart. Simmons is outside sweeping sidewalk grime. "Good evening, Sammie," he says. Polite, but he's got his little thing. Wooden-crate fruit displays stand outside the door like in the old days, when the SuperMart really was super, not a three-aisle, two-cooler supply depot of Twinkies, gum, cigarettes, frozen pizza, aspirins, Coke, and other essentials of university students and Capitol workers. Simmons never worries about stolen fruit. I'm probably one of maybe five customers who ever wants any.

"Hi, Sims," I say while I take a little paper bag from a U-serve stack and peruse the heady bananas and apples. "Have you heard anything about the police cracking down on panhandlers lately?"

He puts a finger thoughtfully on his cheek. "Ain't been no street sweep I know about. Now that you mention it, it's been a little quiet, ain't it?" He does a mental tally, which for him is over quick. "Haven't seen Jake for a while. Towelman hasn't bought his daily apple for... oh, let's see... was he here last Friday?" He winks at me. "You know he puts that apple in the front of his diaper?"

"Yes, I know," I look away—Simmons's thoughtful finger has migrated off his cheek and up his nose. I choose a couple nice bananas, hesitate over the apples, try not to think about the Towelman's apple, shove two in my paper bag.

Simmons continues to mine a nostril. "Come to think of it," he says, digging like there's a sowbug way up there, "where's the Screamer Twins? I knew it was peaceful around here lately. Ain't heard them girls screeching yet tonight. Why do colored girls always talk at the top of their lungs, anyhow? They think people can't hear 'em?"

African-American, I think automatically. *Colored*, Jesus! What cave has Simmons been in the last thirty years? But you scratch your ass these days and some scabby unemployed old looking for honey money is going to sue you for prejudice or infringement or rights abuse or what the hell. Respect—just a word in the dictionary.

I hold out money for the fruit and try not to see what Simmons wipes on his pantleg before taking the coins. A little cockroach of a thought scurries around my head: the Screamer Twins weren't what you'd call derelicts; they drove a mean-looking Mazda and had half a gold mine piercing every body-flange in sight and probably a few more underneath.

Then along comes a car vibrating the concrete with about a hundred decibels of CD howls and there goes any ability to think or even look cross-eyed. A yellow Toyota with its windows open and its stereo set on Air-Raid Wail screeches to a halt at the corner light, waits a few seconds, then shrieks into motion on the green and throbs down State Street. Low notes punch through my skeleton as the car passes.

"What's this kid thing," Simmons snorts. "Douchebags think we all wanna enjoy a seismic blast every time they cruise by?"

I remember the stack of manuscripts requiring attention back in the office, so I abandon my street-people counting and hurry to the coffee shop. I purchase a large cup of the charcoal-flavored French to go; the taste sucks canal water, but Stinking Tom hates it worse and won't ask for a dixie cup when I get back.

As I leave the coffee shop, the yellow Toyota sits cockeyed in an intersection farther up the street, like it died just about to turn the corner. A cop's already inspecting it. Good, I think, maybe car-jackings have finally come to Mad Town and the driver was shot in the head with a very loud revolver; one can always hope. The Toyota's motor is running, but the radio is silent. The car's unoccupied. Like the guy'd up and Twilight-Zoned it right off the planet.

NEXT AFTERNOON on my way to work I see the Man in Black. Right off that's how I think because he dredges up memories of those comic-book Aliens in Disguise Walk Among Us. He's bundled in a black preacher suit, lecher-type raincoat, old fedora jammed on his head. His face is squooshed up between the brim of his hat and his turned-up raincoat collar. Creepy bastard, body core of a heat-seeking lizard—it's like at least 85 degrees and the sidewalks waver in heat waves. Creep gives me a dirty look 'cause he has to dodge my carryall—which I'll admit is kind of a duffel bag, and I got my gym clothes in there, and a lunch, and you don't want to know. "Sorry," I say, as I try to be polite, last person on Earth who stoops to being nice to these clowns, and I tuck my bag close. Man in Black Creep says nothing, just sashays all-pot-out on his way. Just what State Street needs. Niche opens up, bang, another loon comes along to fill it.

I watch him hustle up the street and see he's headed for another real bad encounter to further improve his mood. Right in his path is a college kid walking his all-breed mutt, and the dog's humping up about to dump on the sidewalk. There's some kind of justice there, but I decide it's time to cross the street. I take one step toward the curb when a past-middle-age woman pipes next to my elbow, "Did you see that?"

"See what," I ask and look around, her voice suggests maybe a plane crash or atomic mushroom cloud. I look for the Man in Black and only secondarily notice that the college kid and his dog—and the dog-doo, if any had been produced—aren't where they were like ten seconds ago. Then I see Pasta Porta's boys under their awning, looking into the alley and having some choice words in Italian.

"He's gone! He disappeared! Just like that! The dog, too!" The old girl stretches out an arm jangling with charm bracelets, a finger with a red nail longer than all of mine put

together points up the street. "I tell you, they just disappeared. I was looking right at them. I was thinking, He really should curb that dog. Or not bring it on the public sidewalk. Police don't do a thing about it. People who have dogs should keep them in their own yards. Let them walk in their own dog craps."

"Lady," I break in (let motormouths get a head of steam and pretty soon the polite listener's drowning in verbal diarrhea), "he had the dog right in front of Porta's. Restaurant people run 'em off quick when they see that. Big dog pile takes the customer's mind off spaghetti and meatballs."

"No, no. I *seen* it, I tell you. Just like that. That preacher man walked by, but the dog fella was just gone and now I don't see the. . . Honey, you mustn't do that. Biting your fingernails is a filthy habit."

Geez. I'm done with polite. I jaywalk to the safety of Cromwell's College Clothes and continue on my way. Someone should wash that woman's face. Plastering makeup on jowls and wrinkles just turns ugly into pitiful, and *Porta Porta goons or no goons, be did vanish awfully fast*, and next the bag would be diving her hair flaming whorehouse red—

Another cockroach thought nigs and pokes at the back of my mind.

Obnoxious people. Not just street scum, and you only got to look around. Puerile collegians wearing vulgar tee-shirts. Perfume dousers who walk around like clouds of poison gas. Radio blasters in cars, second-floor apartments, stereo shop entrances, who force their choice of din into everyone's ears. Look-at-me geeks with green spike hairdos, shaved heads, pierced tongues, jeans slashed to show a peek of knee, snatch, butt-cheek. Drunks heaving in doorways. Inarticulate illiterates whose every other word is *fuck*. Screaming babies, parents who scream at babies, baby strollers and *wheelchairs* blocking the public sidewalk. People who *spit* gum, tobacco, green-oyster gobs; people who refuse to bathe, comb their hair, brush their teeth, wipe the crust from their eyes, dress their age, act their age, dress, and act *normally*; ape-ugly, hypocritical, impolite, intolerant, *obnoxious*.

And vanishing.

As though some over-sensitive, knee-jerk reactionary had just been suddenly granted the Magic Finger of Fate.

AS I ARRIVE the next night at the *Street Beat News*, I expect the office to be blue with new cigar phlegm, so I hit the vent switch before I realize that the stink is just the normal, wall-impregnated smell of stale smoke. I glance suspiciously at Tom. What the hell now, I wonder. I start to feel grateful for small favors and think about airing my theory of some crazy douchebag doing in obnoxious street characters, when I hear a mouth-filling, juicy *pppppp fleewaaa*. Followed by a wet metallic *clink*.

I put a hand over my eyes. "Tom, if you're chewing tobacco, I hope to God you're not spitting in the wastebasket." I absolutely refuse to look around at him. I absolutely refuse to look at puke piles on the sidewalk, too, but somehow my eyes always manage a quick flick, enough to etch the chunks and goo on my brains in minutest detail.

He sees me peek and deliberately lets a little brown line ooze between his lips. "S'matter, Sammie? I thought you'd be happy I gave up stogies." *Proctor flicks. Plink.*

I listen to the comforting growl of the vent fan and I count to fifty. Finally I murmur, "Disgusting people aren't *all* out on the streets. Too bad that intolerant crazy's not for hire."

Tom's chair squeaks. "Say what?"

"Gotta theory. Nam Pete's still missing, you know."

"So? And amen."

"I think someone is snatching street people. Making them disappear out of thin air. In the Fifties, sci-fi rags printed a dozen stories a year about mysterious vanishings. I'm thinking maybe some of 'em were based on experience."

Tom laughs, wet and juicy. "Sure. Alien abduction."

"He takes only the most repugnant ones." I think for a second. "No, that's not quite right. Pete wasn't repugnant. Nor was Unwashed Mary, if you stayed upwind."

"That's a matter of opinion. The Towelman sure as hell was. Hey, you ever notice that guy was hung like a horse?"

I raise an eyebrow and almost set him straight but decide that a self-made human dumpster-drainhole deserves to wallow in ignorance as well as filth. "So this intolerant guy," I say, "doesn't like *quirky* people. Considers them intrusive to his sacred idea of how people should act and look. Self-righteous bigot type, there's some out there. Hey, Tom, I don't suppose *you're* the abductor?"

Ppppppt plevvva. Plink. "Ha, ha! Right. I got ol' toasted Pete locked up in my basement at home and force him to serenade me or I play tapes of exploding grenades." He grabs a T-square and plunks it like a pretend guitar. "The *churrrob* bell chimes; it rings ravenmy-nine times; la da daab la da daab la da dabb dah—" His caterwauling dislodges the tobacco wad and sends it down his throat. There is a God in heaven.

I turn back to my computer and begin sorting the night's manuscripts. I'm not surprised when he gets up and heads for the door. His face is tinged green. "Need me another pouch of Red Man," he says.

He does not return by the time I finish rendering slush into printable manuscripts and go out for my evening fruit and coffee. I am in no mood to do a missing-snotball count tonight.

At the Folks SuperMart, grocer Simmons's pimply son takes my money for a nice bunch of green grapes. "Dad got a night off, Johnny?" I ask.

Johnny's bored blind with nine-to-five drudge. He gives me the evil eye. "Son of a bitch skipped town on me 'n Ma, if you gotta know. Publish it in your crummy rag."

Well, excuse me. Try to make civil small talk—as if I *care*, right?—and I get shit from a stupid, numb-nuts dork brat son of a major dork. Consideration, a dead language.

I make out Vicky's red-and-blue Coffee Shop sign on the next block, and unfortunately I also see the Weaver's set-up on the curbside between me and javaland. One street slime's still in business. His silly TV tray holds wads of yarn. Most of the time he pretends to knit or weave—never, of course, actually doing anything but making neat skeins of yarn into one unraveled ball of mess—for which entertainment he expects the usual tribute of spare change. Tonight he's brought out his bubble solution and is treating passers-by to showers of hovering bubbles. Soapy things bust against eyeglasses, lips, contact lenses. A bubble in the eye, especially filled with the Weaver's own breath, should certainly rank as a first-class ticket to the Disneyworld of alien abduction laboratories.

I gird myself for the bubbles; the coffee shop is just ten steps beyond him and I gotta pass by. I wait for the light on the corner and consider my options, which are exactly nil unless I want to detour around the block and look like a total dork myself. There on the corner, I'm next to a little green-space in front of the University Credit Union, and I notice a couple sitting on one of the veranda benches. The couple is into heavy-duty necking, and even though I don't stare, my good ol' photographic puke-imaging mind's eye holds the flash of the girl's hands and what they are busy doing. Well, hell, what's wrong with that, I scold myself, not being a prude. And hey, they weren't making noise; they weren't hurting anyone. Lots of worse things are done on the street. And they weren't on the street.

But geez, what is it with kids and this sick need for disgusting public display, like it was some kind of lookit-me game that they gotta do or otherwise they'd just remain totally obscure little rodents—

The light changes in the midst of my moral musing, and I bulb the Man in Black crossing the street toward me. The creep is now a truly spooky shadow in the night and moreover he's rubbing an eye, so I know he's just had an intimacy with a Weaver-breath soap bubble. Automatically I twist my carryall out of his way as we pass each other. I give him a little look-see over my shoulder and he's glancing at the necking couple, and the little piece of his face visible between fedora and coat-collar frowns sourly. Tight-ass prude. He must be cooking in that black get-up, I think. I lose sight of the overcoat among the street's summer-shorts-and-tee-shirt milieu and add people who dress funny to my list of obnoxious abduction candidates.

I sneak a peek to check the girl's progress. The bench is empty. Did they leave? Like that?

I turn and look ahead to see Vicky's red-and-blue neon sign sizzling down on the Weaver's yarn-draped TV tray. A

few bubbles waft to the sidewalk and pop. Nobody's there to blow more.

So.

I BUT A BOOM-BOX. My laundry basket offers up two pairs of unwashed gym socks, both of which I pull on, and they briefly make me think of the crossdresser in the chimney and his two pairs of socks, although mine probably smell worse than he ever did, moldering away all those months. I put on baggy sweat pants, then the pink-flamingo-red-hibiscus-blue-palm-tree Hawaiian shirt, and I dose it with birthday cologne—you don't want to know how old, and I can't say why I ever kept it. I gob styling gel on my hair and make an approximation of mud-coated dreadlocks. I dust baby powder to give my face that corpse look so popular with the after-bar-time punk crowd who live under rocks during daylight. I jam a can of pepper gas in a front pocket where it makes a nice bulge.

This is crazy, I think more than once. But, like, reason it out. They all *can't* just be wrestled into a hidden car or otherwise meeting with foul play. It takes effort and struggle and at least *some* noise to make a person vanish against their will on an always-busy street, full of Midwestern urban-babes-in-the-woods who aren't used to seeing—most of them never seen—people attacked in plain sight. So I figger someone—probably dressed in black like a preacher-cum-lecher, but we won't go making insinuations just yet—is luring them off into the darkness, probably with money as the bait, because money is the one substance no street person can resist.

At eleven PM I set off on State Street, chomping eight sticks of gum open-mouthed, dancing drunken little jigs to the blaring of slash & trash, hoping no one from the office recognizes me.

After five minutes I move the boom-box from shoulder to sidewalk before it gives me permanent hearing damage, if it hasn't already. I dance around the black-and-chrome plastic noisemaker, occasionally shoving out a palm and a monotone "spare change?" to passers-by. I make two dollars and sixty-five cents. I learn I don't have to worry about being recognized. No eyes within twenty yards look directly at me—

—except for a small crowd of out-of-town scum, gang garbage from Shytown 'hoods, probably looking for Madison's few but reliable hash markets. I keep an eye on them, 'cause from the looks I'm getting I see they're working up to give me shit, and sure enough.

"Hya doon?" greets one of the seven original dwarfbrain slimes. "Yo, wachu doon, dancin' inna street?" He starts jiving with the music, snapping his fingers. The others jive or stand around. They *like* the ungodly noise, for chrisake. The one that could talk was taking too-careful a look at me.

"What be you gig, anyhow? I don see you round dis street," he says.

He senses I'm as real a street person as the Pope. I keep wiggling, look at the sidewalk, flip my fingers to the pounding rhythm. "Actually, I'm interested in the man at the bus stop across the street," I say in what I hope is undercover-cop talk, "but if you insist on also doing business with me, I shall be happy to accommodate you." Man, what am I doing editing a two-bit freebie like the *Street News*? I'm screenwriter talent, hey.

The Illinois foreigners share a number of glances with each other, then the articulate one jerks his head and the gang resumes their tour of State Street. *Three* characters taking out the locals? Nah, no money in it unless they're selling body organs, and the riffraff they're taking don't have organs anymore, not ones useable by humans.

For not the first time I wonder if it's me who's dreaming. Maybe local color *always* vanishes and reappears at random intervals, and this is just one of those coincidental occasions, an inexplicable twisting of fate and universal averages, like when fireflies all light up at once over a swamp, that makes a bunch decide at the same time to take a hiatus to wherever street scum go for a change of venue.

The loud music is altering my brain chemistry; I am transforming into a zombie. My socks must be noticeable for yards all around. I turn up the radio just a tad, wondering if its mechanisms are as strained as my inner ear's hair cells, and begin to spare-change people again. I catch the Man in Black headed my way.

So, aha, and well, well. Whatever he does, I can palm my can of pepper gas faster. The street is still full of people. The Chicago contingent lean against some fool's parked car down the block and watch me, no doubt making boombox-napping plans of their own for later.

I'll ask Mister MIB if he noticed anybody missing; he'll have to stop or veer or in some way acknowledge obnoxious of me, and then we'll see if the creepy cockroach can disappear a *normal* person as easy as sidewalk slime.

He flinches as I jig and prance up to him

"Say, buddy," I yell over the radio's din, and my hand is ready in my weapons pocket, right on the bulge. "Need a date?"

"Jesus saves!" he coughs like I just asked if it'd be okay I take a bite out of his nose. With amazing agility he pushes past without actually touching me and zips away, vanishing in shadow and neon light and crowd just as completely as if a flying saucer had swept him to Venus.

Well. So. You get what you see, Sammie, I think. Alien abductor! Let's talk about being a thousand miles off base. Just one of those neurotics who can't stand to be touched and has to walk up and down crowded streets to let everyone know it.

I look down at my boombox and shut it off. I lean against the nearby lightpost and think what is next. I examine my nails, choose a fairly long one that looks like it's had at least three days of uninterrupted growth. *Snik snik cik donk . . .*

Of course, that's when it happened. Anyone could've guessed. Limbo bomb-out. For a second I think I see something in the corner of my eye—a black-marker drawing, or maybe even some plastic gizmo, a nest of concentric squares that reminds me of an Escher drawing, strangely enough, like the dusty ceiling vent in the *Street Beat News* office ceiling.

It's only a flash. And then there's silence. And grayness. And no State Street, no concrete, no sky, no Badgettown Liquors, no Vicky's Coffee, no Madison, no Earth. Gray fog-stuff. I look around slowly, like I am not a little stunned, and it takes me maybe a full thirty seconds when it gets to my brain that I'm focusing on a squished yellow Polish sausage of dog-doo under my left foot.

So I am sucked in to join all the other unwashed obnoxious scum stuck on the dust filter of the vent of Dimension X. Everybody looks a little worried, but there's no hunger or thirst, just boredom; most go about their business as always, the whores whacking someone off, Jake punching the air, Pete wailing the song off-key, Torn hawking tobacco gobs on the fog, Unwashed Mary moving her bags, first one pair, then the other, perpetually through the grayness. For self-preservation, I've got my boom-box blasting on my shoulder, and there's no way I'll ever take off my socks, not that I could bring myself to touch them anyway, but they do keep the slimes at bay. Funny, I never considered that street people maybe didn't like stink or loud noise or stupid hairdos and stuff, like normal humans.

Actually, there's more of us here besides street people and the likes of Simmons the grocer, and the Screamer Twins, and the sonic Toyota driver who keeps giving my boom-box really scary looks. There's a grandma who holds the hand of a little girl with pigtails and a backwards baseball cap. There's a couple retirees, some suits, some nice-looking women who could have been on their way to waitress or hotel-clerk jobs. You know the types, invisible in their own commonplace ways.

But still, ain't it funny? Not like Jake or Mary or Pete or a crossdressed chimney skeleton. Grandmas and little kids and the people who put quarters into overstretched palms—*them* you'd think someone would *miss*.

The Man in Black, all hunkered down in his layers of clothes—he arrived not too long after me—sometimes makes me think that maybe a lizard alien scientist is doing it, researching Earthlings, and that suffering in the cold like a martyr for his lizard-world's academia makes him crabby as hell, so that any little thing at the wrong moment—a burp, a fart, whatever—and *slurp* you're sucked up out of

his royal presence. On the other hand, maybe it's just a crackpot inventor—UW overflow post-doc riffraff, God knows there's plenty—who has this attitude: *You* are no longer an acceptable human being, and so I relegate you to the flypaper of hell. Or maybe thinks he's doing everyone a favor with his off-the-wall dimension-vent machine,

although the crazy numb-nuts should have been a little more lenient with me.

Or maybe it's just what happens when too many eyes turn away, refusing to see you. But I suppose that's how it is. Everyone is so judgmental these days.

Geez.

II

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Believing in the Twentieth Century

by Darrell Schweitzer

Illustrated by GAK

ABOUT THE TIME THEY REACHED THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, Egon wondered what had ever caused him to marry Draxilla. Maybe she had her redeeming features. Maybe he'd even loved her once. But now there were only her crazy obsessions, which ran her life, and his.

Twentieth Century clubs. Twentieth Century fashions, tableaux, re-enactments, rituals, research, facsimiles, holoresurrections. And when that wasn't enough—

He felt increasingly queasy as the last few decades slipped by.

She kept on arguing.

"It's all true," she said. "Now you're going to find out—"

He sighed. "You're endlessly credulous. Such things were never possible—"

"Closed-minded skeptic!"

The time-bubble burst. Pop. Thud. The two of them tumbled into a deserted field. He lurched to his feet, gingerly brushing strange particulate matter from his bare skin.

"We're *here*," she said. "Welcome to the Twentieth Century."

"I loathe it already."

He found that he could not cleanse himself. He rubbed his arms and sides hard, and realized he was shivering from ... what was the word? The auxiliary data-brain embedded in his skull behind his ear kicked in and supplied the answer, silently, inside his head: *cold*. The atmosphere was uncontrolled. Appalling. The thought of gases drifting randomly made him vaguely nauseous.

"In the Twentieth Century," Draxilla said, the patronizing tone in her voice terribly unsubtle, "people would wear body-coverings called clothes." She touched the subcutaneous implant beneath her chin and ludicrous coverings materialized over most of her body, doubtless the properly researched costume for the period. "It's part of the experience. Learn to enjoy it."

"I don't think I can." Already he longed for the rational, sanitary world they'd left behind—or ahead—thirty thousand years in the future, when things made sense, the laws of nature were understood, and there were no miracles.

They had come here in search of miracles. That was the essence of the Twentieth Century, she insisted, that miracles still happened. It was a time to *believe* rather than to *know*. The data-brain supplied an endless stream of nonsense words: *psychic healing, UFOs, telepathy, astrology*. All of them had been a part of daily life, if the literature of the era was to be taken seriously.

(His data-brain supplied a bibliography: MacLaine, Von Däniken, Dixon, a complete sequence of something called *Weekly World News*.)

"Please," he said. "Let's just go back now—"

She hooked a finger under his chin, and he too was clothed, scraped and clawed from every direction by repulsive vegetable and animal fibers he didn't care to ask the data-brain to catalog.

"Come along," she said, dragging him.

"Yes, Dear."

"What a wonderful Twentieth Century expression! You *have* been doing your homework!"

"Homework?"

"Never mind. Come."

They rose into the air. By moonlight he could see that the field was filled almost to the horizon with gently swaying objects ... matter ... *crops* the data-brain told him. Stationery, living organisms the people of this barbaric epoch ate for food. *Wheat*.

He couldn't bring himself to care that the bursting time-bubble had flattened some of the *wheat* in a broad, circular pattern. The whole thing was too revolting to contemplate.

He alighted beside Draxilla on a pathway of some kind, made of what must have been molded stone. (*Asphalt, said the data-brain.*)

"No more antigravity from now on," she said. "We can't attract attention!"

"If we can't use the most rudimentary conveniences, I'm leaving."

"You are *not*, until our argument is settled. Remember. You *promised*."

"Yes," he said. "I did." He'd made that promise in a moment of weakness, in the vain hope that it would put an end to Draxilla's absurdities.

(*Marital psychology, said the data-brain. Data inadequate for full explication.*)

"You and me both," Egon whispered under his breath.

"Did you say something?" Draxilla asked.

"No, no. Nothing."

The asphalt path entered a gloomy stand of larger plants. (*Highway, forest, the data-brain supplied. Trees.*) Something ugly and green, uncomfortable to the touch, brushed into Egon's face and broke off in his hand. (*Leaf.*) He threw it after Draxilla, who pressed fearlessly onward. The highway looped and twisted in an erratic manner utterly offensive to civilized aesthetics.

"Can't we just stop?" he gasped, already out of breath. "Let's just pretend we were here. Tell your friends back home anything you want."

She stood still, sucking in the cool, strangely-scented night air.

"No. We've only just begun. We're *fated* to be here. It is our *destiny*!"

"Utterly irrational!"

"Gloriously so. Now stop complaining—Oh!" She held both hands to her temples. "Oh! I'm having a psychic flash! Something is near, an intelligence, non-human. . . . Oh!"

"You're faking."

"I—"

A huge manlike shape, startled, stood up from where it had been crouching by the edge of the highway. All Egon could make out in the darkness was that the creature was easily twice his height and covered with fur. It grunted, bared its fangs, and loped off into the forest on enormous feet.

"I knew it!" she said. "I *told* you so! In the Twentieth Century there *are* such things!"

"An animal," he said. "Yes, they had animals running around loose. A bear, I think." (But his data-brain insisted it had not been a bear) "How could it have been anything else? There are no gorillas in North America." (The data-brain backed him up on that. It offered one more nonsense word: *Sasquatch*.)

"Never mind," she said. "You'll see."



But as they approached a town in the morning twilight, it was far worse than merely *seeing* anything. Massive, uncontrolled vehicles roared past.

Irrelevant, disturbing thoughts touched his mind, as lightly and irritatingly as a feather, tickling him. (The data-brain supplied the imagery.)

Something was clearly wrong. He couldn't concentrate. If either his primary, organic brain or the implanted data-brain malfunctioned, he knew, he would be helpless. He wouldn't be able to make himself understood. He'd have to return home at once. He almost hoped it *was* his brain "on the blink," as the local idiom had it.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he said.

"That's wonderful!"

"It is? Why?"

"It's an essential Twentieth Century experience. You're having a *premonition*!"

"I feel sick."

Now the feather-tickling had become iron spikes driven into his head. The Twentieth Century was *bedlam*. (Images, metaphors supplied by the data-brain.) Even among the crowded buildings, vast metal machines hurled perilously through the streets.

The noise. The smells. The thousand voices jabbering in his mind, extraneous thoughts, repulsive imagery, as if all the strangely garbed citizenry shouted their innermost thoughts directly at him.

But Draxilla was ecstatic.

"That *proves* I'm right! We're experiencing telepathy!"

Only after concentrated effort was he able to reply. "The human mind has no such capacity! It is biologically impossible."

"Here in the Twentieth Century, no one cared about that. They believed in telepathy, so they experienced it."

"The next thing you'll be telling me is that they believed the Earth was flat, so it was flat."

"Some of them *did* believe, but not enough. It remained round."

He was in too much discomfort to argue. The sensation of telepathy was wretched. He tried to remember how it had been in the future, floating alone in silent, sanitary light, but he couldn't hold the thought as Draxilla hauled him through the streets for what must have been hours. She touched innumerable minds *deliberately*, sometimes joining hands with passers-by to feel their "energy" (a word she used with decreasing precision). She led him into a shop where, by some medium of exchange he couldn't understand (the data-brain muttered something; he didn't bother to listen), she acquired two fragments of crystalline quartz strung on animal-tissue fibers. She placed one over her own head, so that the crystal hung down her chest, and insisted he do the same with the other.

"It's very powerful," she said. "Don't you feel the vibrations?"

As much as he wanted to deny it, he did indeed feel the vibrations. Whether they had any significance or not, he didn't care to discuss. He tried to reserve what little mental coherence he had left for the formulation of a theory that the chief, and in fact *only*, experience of the Twentieth Century was, by definition, mass insanity.

"Oh!" she shouted aloud, clapping her hands, leaping into the air, dancing and twirling on the (*sidewalk* said his data-brain), "it's everything I had hoped for, a whole new *world* filled with wonders!"

Twentieth Century people turned to stare.

(*Is she on something?*) The thought came to him from somewhere. The data-brain researched the metaphor, but could not define it.)

"It's so different from our own," she continued. "Here each individual is *special*. What they *feel*, that is real. Nothing else. How did we ever give it all up?"

He shrugged wearily. His data-brain launched into a history lecture until he told it to stop.

"Never mind," she said. "Now what I want to know is the *future*."

That snapped him out of his stupor. He grabbed her by the arm and yanked her to a halt.

"We have to return home right *now*. You are obviously dysfunctional. You forget that we're *from* the future!"

She made a face at him, stuck out her tongue (*Twentieth Century mode of communication*, said his data-brain, *meaning uncertain*), and wriggled free of his grasp. "Silly! This is what I mean—"

She snatched a sheaf of (*newspaper*, said his data-brain) from a sidewalk stand, flipped through it, and read aloud: "Taurus. Today marks the beginning of your ultimate quest." She closed the paper. "There you have it. The stars have spoken."

"The stars, you know perfectly well, are masses of fusing hydrogen. They *do not* speak."

"Here in the Twentieth Century, they control our lives. As long as you're here, you're going to have to get used to it."

"We're leaving—*right now*!"

But the future, their future, from which they had journeyed in the time-bubble, seemed unreachably far away just then. Was this another . . . what was it? (*Premonition*.)

"Not so fast," she said, grabbing hold of him as he had grabbed her. She waved her free hand in the air. "Taxi!"

One of the hurtling metal machines screeched to a stop. They climbed inside. Incomprehensible transactions with the device's operator followed. (The very idea of a machine directed by a *living* being seemed too fantastically cruel for words. *Slavery*, the data-brain suggested, searching for a

more precise analogy.) His stomach seemed to heave one way, his head the other, as the *taxi* sped through the streets, finally slamming to a halt at a location Draxilla and the operator had somehow agreed upon.

When they got back home, he swore, he was going to pop the module out of her data-brain some night while she slept and purge this Twentieth Century rubbish from memory. All of it. He didn't care about the legal consequences.

Draxilla showed him out of the taxi.

Outside on the sidewalk, he swayed dizzily for several seconds before blearily noting the sign on the building in front of them. The script said (as his data-brain translated): MADAME ESTELLA, PSYCHIC READER.

Draxilla herded him up the walkway to the door and rang the bell. Footsteps approached from within. "This is very special indeed. Think of it as a shrine to the collective faith of the Twentieth Century."

(*Chured*, his data-brain said.)

"Not a church," Draxilla said. "Something more important." So now she could read his mind too. It only figured.

The door opened. The old, bent woman standing there was eccentrically dressed, even by Twentieth Century standards. (*Gypsy*, the data-brain supplied, then supplied an ethnological treatise that did not seem immediately relevant.)

"Ah," the Gypsy woman said, "I was expecting you."

(*Yep, another premonition*, Egon's data-brain observed dryly. *Are you surprised, I mean, really?* He felt a moment of helpless terror. He was becoming corrupted. Here in the Twentieth Century, machines allegedly developed personalities. All he needed now to make the nightmare complete was a wise-cracking data-brain.)

Inside, they sat around a table in semi-darkness, in a curtained room filled with the paraphernalia of the Gypsy's profession: crystal ball; astrological charts; a paperback *Necronomicon*; statues of multi-armed, dancing figures; a shrunken head; numerous crystal pyramids, some with razor blades beneath them; and much more the data-brain could not identify. The old woman served them cups of a hot beverage which had, he admitted, a genuinely pleasant odor. For an instant he almost relaxed, but as he went to stir his drink (*tea*) the instrument provided for the purpose (*spoon*) suddenly bent itself into uselessness for no apparent reason. The old Gypsy woman and Draxilla likewise held damaged spoons.

Childish laughter came from an adjoining room.

"Junior!" shouted the Gypsy. "That's enough! Stop it at once!"

"Sorry, Gramma."

They put their spoons aside and drank their tea. Then the old woman took his hand in hers and traced the lines on his palm with her index finger.

Her eyes widened. "This is very strange. You don't seem to have any fingerprints."

"Of course not," he said in his most patronizing voice. ("You ignorant savage," he wanted to add, but restrained himself). "No one has had individual markings since the middle of the Twenty-Fourth Century at least—"

Draxilla kicked him under the table, hard and painfully. (*Twentieth Century method to tell you to shut up*, her voice announced inside his head, telepathically.)

"Nevertheless," Madame Estella continued, "I see quite clearly that you have come on a long journey, and that very soon your existence will undergo an abrupt transition—"

(*You can hardly deny now*, Draxilla continued inside his head, *that I've won the argument. This is what the Twentieth Century is all about.*)

He yanked his hand away from the startled Madame Estella. "I can't take any more of this! Look! Look! I'm psychic too! I foresee a definite parting of the ways, Dearest." He glared at his wife. "That means I'm leaving, right now. You can stay here if you like. I don't care anymore! That's my prediction! I can do it! I can do it! I prophesy a divorce!"

He ran out of the building, down the steps, into the street.

Machine parts squealed. (*Track*, the data-brain identified the oncoming vehicle as it hit him.)

EGON'S ORGANIC MIND was filled with murmurings, like a gentle tide. (The data-brain, damaged, supplied the imagery, but failed to define.) Draxilla wept over him (whatever weeping was) and held his hand, begging him to let the healing "energy" flow into him. (By now that term seemed to mean anything she wanted it to, or nothing at all.) They were in a room somewhere, surrounded by others, amid burning plant-matter (*herbal incense*). He watched dully as crystals and assorted brightly-colored stones were placed on the injured parts of his body. Fortunately there was no pain. In his own time, in the future, people learned how to shut off pain in earliest childhood.

Once he thought he'd known what the future was. Now he wasn't sure. How could anyone? The very idea involved several logical fallacies.

The people around him were chanting words he couldn't make out. His data-brain failed to translate. Someone asked what his spirit-animal was.

"Oh," Draxilla whispered to him. "How I envy you! You're so lucky!"

"Lucky?"

"This is the core experience of the Twentieth Century. Haven't you learned *anything*?"

"I don't know . . ." he said.

"I wish I could share it with you . . ."

"Didn't you once say that in the Twentieth Century wishes are everything?"

He couldn't hear her answer. Somehow he managed to slip off into sleep, into a dream in which he struggled to climb a glass slope up out of darkness and into light; but he made no progress at all, slipping ever downward despite his desperate efforts. As he slid, his body changed, becoming coarser, bent, covered with hair. Somehow he knew his brain was getting smaller. (*Australopithecus*, the data-brain said before it shut off once and for all, no longer able to fit into his diminishing skull.) Near the very end he seemed to have scales and fins, as he flopped in the muck at the edge of a dark, cold sea, gasping for breath, unable to care about anything anymore.

And then he was in a different place, strangely serene, completely at peace. His beloved Draxilla stood beside him in the moonlight at the edge of the same field where the time-bubble had deposited them. He felt increasingly light-headed.

"At last," he said. "We're going home."

"You are," she said, "in a sense. But to a new home."

He searched his mind for his data-brain, but it wasn't there.

"I don't understand. Aren't you coming with me?"

"This is where we part," she said. He thought he detected genuine regret in her voice.

"But . . . I'm returning to our own time, aren't I? Why can't you come with me?"

"I could return to our original time," she said, "if I wanted to. But *you* couldn't exist there."

All his anger had left him. "Please explain," he said softly.

"Look at yourself. Look closely."

He saw that he was naked once more, but somehow his body had become transparent as smoke. It glowed slightly.

She sobbed. "We couldn't save you. There was just too much negative energy. You shut us out by your refusal to believe."

"I—"

Something bright and round moved across the sky. It wasn't the moon, he realized.

"You have to go away now," she said, "the way many people did, in the Twentieth Century."

The flying saucer settled into the field as gently as a cloud. Its hatchway opened in a burst of blinding light. Hesitantly, he made his way toward it, until at last he could make out faces in the light, smiling at him. Voices beckoned. Even without the data-brain he recognized some of the people there . . . JFK, Marilyn, Elvis . . .

He turned back toward the field only once, and waved briefly.

"I guess you win," he said.

II

On Bringing Up Shapeshifters

How do
shapeshifters name their babies?
They can't say, "Let's name him Harry,
he has Grandpa's eyes." Or nose, or tentacles.
And how do shapeshifters keep their children
in bed at night? A playpen's no obstacle,
a crib no prison. At least they needn't
worry that Junior's head might get caught
between the bars. Mobiles would pose a
special danger, never out of reach
for long. No toy would be too big to
swallow and choke to death on. But
shapeshifter babies must only eat
what they like—try to give one
strained turnips and see how long
her mouth lasts. And what fun
squiggly diaper changes must be! (Enough said.)
I wonder sometimes: How foxy a lady shapeshifter
might feel, knowing her husband can't ask her
why the baby doesn't look
like him.

—Jessica J. Frasca

e-Samizdat Building Cyber-Picket Fences

by Meleney Coit

sa • miz • dat 1. The secret publication and distribution of government-banned literature in the Soviet Union.
2. An underground press. [Russian: *sam*, self + *izdatel'stvo*, publishing house].

NEW TECHNOLOGY HAS ALMOST ALWAYS been perceived as either bringing about a new and improved society, or as accelerating humanity's downfall from some pure, green, technology-free state of paradise. Neither model is particularly accurate, yet writers and thinkers are quick to apply them both to what they perceive as the latest and coolest in transformative technology: the Internet. (The most influential technology may, in fact, turn out to be more efficient, affordable cooking stoves, which will decrease the amount of wood and coal burnt throughout most of the world for cooking; but this phenomenon certainly hasn't gotten much media hype [Kammen 1995]).

Both users and analysts of the Internet have expounded on its potentially transformative nature. Howard Rheingold, in *The Virtual Community*, stressed the Internet's potential for grassroots political action: "The political significance of [computer-mediated communication] lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy." John Barlow, of the Elec-

tronic Frontier Foundation, believes that as people telecommute to work, they will rebuild their communities and their connection to the land. Some users are excited by their ability to gender-bend on the Internet with an ease quite unavailable to their real-life, physical bodies. A person sees in the Internet her ideal world, however she defines it.

This column will try to penetrate the hype and focus instead on a relatively unexplored area of information technologies:

Given existing global inequalities in the production of information, will new information technologies improve the ability for *all people*—rich and poor, in Mali and Maine—to consume and produce knowledge? Or will these new technologies instead widen the gap between "First World" and "Third World" peoples in their ability to access and produce information?

Let me set the stage with a few facts which document current inequalities in knowledge production, using book

production (a still-important form of communication and information exchange) as an example. The costs of print media are expected to be greatly reduced through electronic communication, so the current state of global book production is a good measure of the Internet's revolutionary promise, and the price of failure.

- It has been estimated that, in 1988, there were 29 books titles published per one million inhabitants in Africa; 481 per one million North Americans; and 534 per one million Europeans, counting the USSR as part of Europe (Rathgeber 1992).
- During the 1980s, Cameroon imported about 80% of its textbooks from abroad; Nigeria—Africa's most populous country—imported about 75% of the books sold in that country (Curwen 1986).
- Because it costs more to ship books from one West African port to another than to London, it is easier to buy a Nigerian-published book in London than in Accra, the capital of Ghana (Nwankwo 1992). Furthermore, through national bibliographies in developed countries (like the Library of Congress) a Nigerian

librarian can more easily discover what books have been published on a given topic in Britain or the United States than find relevant titles published in the Cote d'Ivoire, India, or Tanzania (Altbach 1987).

- The United States-based McGraw-Hill Publishing company sells many of its textbooks overseas, which accounts for 20% of its revenues. Joseph Dionne, its CEO, says, "We're growing a lot faster overseas than we are domestically" (*Christian Science Monitor* 8 December 1995).
- Thirty-seven percent of all British books are sold overseas (Gopinathan 1995).

So what? Who cares?

Publishing and other types of information technologies allow who gets to say what and who gets to hear what. It means that (speaking as a white American) what I read and what I hear were most likely written and produced in Europe or North America and the information those locations produce therefore shapes my beliefs and understanding of the world. For instance, Gibbs (1995) reported that mainstream science publishing ignores (does not publish and does not cite) most Third World scientific research and findings, thereby depriving both the First World and other Third World countries of vital and important knowledge—about cholera or the ebola virus, for instance. Database publishers of scientific articles, such as MEDLINE, SCI, and INSPEC, only cull their offerings from those journals that are heavily cited, thus further depriving Third World scientists of the opportunity to share their knowledge with each other. Furthermore, scientific research from the Third World is often discredited as not rigorous. Dr. Manuel Patarroyo of Colombia discovered a vaccine against malaria, but his findings were scorned by the international research community for six years, because, he says, "When we first published our

data in 1987, [the international research community] said, 'It's impossible that a malaria vaccine is coming from Colombia.' They were reluctant to accept that there was not just a malaria vaccine, but the world's first chemically synthesized vaccine" (<http://www.idrc.ca/booksreports/10ptarra.html>). Ten years later, the same scientific community has accepted his data, and large-scale production of the world's first malaria vaccine could start as early as 1997.

So, will innovative technologies like the Internet, fax machines, and computer-assisted typesetting make it easier for Third World publishing companies to disseminate the books they publish, and for scientists from different parts of the globe to share their knowledge with one another? Or will it only increase the existing inequalities?

Below, I present a case which seems to suggest that technology—no matter how new and how different—cannot change existing power relations and rhetorical practices.

YOU BEGIN in a coat closet, an eerie, dark place in which you keep bumping into what feel like coats, boots, and other people. This closet is one of a vast network of rooms in a mansion, a mansion grown so large that some people consider it a city. But this is not a game: people are here to socialize and to build rooms and objects creatively (through programming and writing). You are visiting a MOO*, an electronic community. Specifically the largest, most populous MOO, named LambdaMOO. People connect to LambdaMOO through their modems, and only by typing do they evoke the feel of rooms and objects. Through text, MOO-users (or MOOers) make a world—a new and better world, they believe; a utopia even.

*MOO is short for *Multi-User Dimension, Object Oriented*

Here, they feel they have greater freedom than in the real world: they can present themselves as any gender (they have six to choose from!); they can build homes of their own design; they can communicate with people in such places as South Africa, Holland, Australia, the United States, and Portugal (where people have reliable access to electricity, computers, modems, and the Internet). On LambdaMOO, people have made an alternative universe, seemingly bright with possibilities. As some people put it, the Internet is now the frontier.

However, in April 1994, LambdaMOOers decided—after extensive debate—to limit the number of new MOO members. During the debate, MOOers used metaphors of the real world in order to justify such action, specifically the metaphors of immigration, colonialism, and tourism.

In February and March of 1994, fifty to seventy-five new people were joining LambdaMOO each day—creating MOO characters for themselves, interacting with others, and building MOO homes. The population had doubled in six months, and the lag (when the computer performs so many tasks that its processes seem to slow down to the individual user) remained consistently high for several weeks. People also complained about the unpleasant social atmosphere in the living room, a room in which many new MOOers (called newbies) congregated. It was impossible to hold a coherent conversation in the living room, because so many people were there chatting at the same time. Furthermore, people complained about the verbal harassment that frequently occurred there.

Two petitions were created by characters to address these problems. "Zero Population Growth" called for no new characters to be created except when an existing character had permanently left LambdaMOO. Another, called "Minimal Population Growth," allowed five

new characters to be created each day. This second petition eventually passed.

In the debates over the two petitions, people used images from the real world which were the focus of intensely emotional real-life debates. People compared the situation to a nation-state overrun with immigrants, an indigenous community invaded by colonists, a city spoiled by migrants, or a place swamped by tourists.

In all these metaphors, newbies were seen as the source of the MOO's woes: at best, they were ill-cultured boors who needed to be educated into MOO ways of interacting; at worst, they were aliens, a threat to LambdaMOO's culture and community.

Metaphors which drew on real-world images had great emotional bite because they did two things: they demonstrated that LambdaMOO was not the utopia it could be, and they implied that LambdaMOO had the same rights as any country, culture, or community to protect itself, even if the threat were the entire real world.

Although it may seem foolish to compare new users to tourists, colonists, or aliens, LambdaMOOers were grappling with issues that will only grow in importance as more and more people go on-line. The Internet once belonged to the technical elite of computer programmers; the incoming population is far more technically inept. One MOOer coined the phrase "techno-peasantry" to describe newbies.

Furthermore, if anyone is making a profit off (and colonizing) the Internet, it's not the newbies of LambdaMOO. There are commercial forces which are

encroaching more and more on a forum that has until recently functioned without controls, according to Howard Rheingold.

Perhaps this argument is naïve, however. After all, Xerox Corporation owns and operates LambdaMOO as a kind of petri dish, a social and technical experiment. What exactly do MOOers think they're protecting?

At the same time, recent legal regulations do seem to be attempting to control the freedom of the Internet by making it abide by real-life social mores.

I do understand LambdaMOOers' feelings that their MOO way of life is under seige. Nevertheless, their attempt to make their community an exclusive neighborhood is not a long-term solution to the problems they face.

One of the utopian ideals that the MOO offers is the ability to communicate with people on the other side of the world. MOOers will therefore have to be open to different languages (at this point, only the international languages of English, French, and German have any currency on the Internet, reflecting its population), different cultural styles, and different patterns of interaction. At the same time, they will have to find measures to protect personal safety and comfort. No easy task. And, finally, in order to become (truly) a global community, LambdaMOO (and everyone else) will have to be creative about how to give access to those who do not now have reliable access to electricity, computers, modems, and the Internet. Because freedom of expression for the

rich and the rich alone is not freedom of expression.

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Book Reviews & Critical Essays

In each issue of *Terra Incognita*, we will review current works of Earth-based science fiction. As in this issue, we will provide you, whenever possible, with more than one reviewer's opinion of the same book, because we recognize that different people have different perspectives.

Batman: the Ultimate Evil by Andrew Vachss

Batman: the Ultimate Evil

by Andrew Vachss

Warner Books, New York, 1995

US\$19.95/CANADA\$23.95 HC; 214 pages

CAPES, COWLS, & CATAMITES

BY TASHA KELLY

Being a seasoned reader of Andrew Vachss' fiction, I was mildly shocked when I began reading *Batman: the Ultimate Evil*. Familiarity with Vachss' work led me to expect one of two kinds of protagonists: the grim-yet-effective avenger of abuse victims or the victim who has survived abuse—all-knowing, world weary, defensive. Batman, innocent in his world of absolute morality, is neither—he just doesn't know the twisted forms abuse can take. Only later, as the novel swings toward its climax, does Vachss unleash the angry justice of a hero we expect to find in this author's world—a Batman filled to the killing point with unclean knowledge.

As the book begins, our hero is blissfully unaware of the connection between criminals and their upbringing. He dutifully goes about stopping crime in progress. He hasn't thought to wonder what events make a person evil or angry or tortured enough to commit violent crimes, to wonder what makes a criminal. Batman is the cardboard crime-fighter we've come to expect—but not from a writer like Vachss!

Lest we readers close the book too soon, Vachss quickly prepares for Batman's baptism in the fount of criminal knowledge. Through Debra Kane, a crusading social worker sent to minister to the most preyed-upon children, Vachss gives both Batman and the reader an uncomfortable look at the daily depredations and horrors of the abused child. Batman realizes, for the first time, that he must answer a new question—is he really fighting *crime*? Or is he simply fighting the manifestations of a deeper, uglier state of being?

Perhaps these unsettling thoughts would not be impetus enough for Bat-

man to embark on the quest set out for him in *Batman: the Ultimate Evil*. To seal the deal, Vachss sends trusty Alfred to give Batman some horrifying news about the reason behind his parents' deaths. When Batman's complacency is shattered, he is free to become the ice-cold vigilante Vachss needs him to be. Surely, only a person steeped in righteous fury can battle the predators found in this book—child molesters, enslavers, and killers.

With Batman's wish to abolish the demons who hunt children, along with the painful memories of his own tragic childhood, he also sees a way to root out evil in its nascency. Finding and destroying the masterminds behind child pornography and child slavery industries would go a long way toward stamping out the future criminal population. Like characters in other books by Vachss, Batman is no longer content with picking off individual lowlives and begins instead to hunt the creators of future criminals—the adults who abuse children.

In *The Ultimate Evil*, Batman's war against the predators of children provides a plot about as compulsively interesting as a reader can want. Unlike the tepid shenanigans of the Penguin or the Riddler, Batman's opponents are deviously anonymous, pervasive, and worthy of rabid hatred. The ubiquity of this evil network begs for equal outpourings of frustration and sympathy from the reader. We want Batman to crush them all, and crush them good!

As an author, Vachss is best known for his ongoing Burke novels: *Flood*; *Strega*; *Blue Belle*; *Hard Candy*; *Blossom*; *Sacrifice*; *Down in the Zero*; and *Footsteps of the Hawk*. Vachss paints a brutal, unflinching portrait of the abuse cycle which is used as the backdrop for Burke, a mercenary/vigilante. Burke slogs through the basest of base criminals in New York City, sifting, gleaming, searching for child abusers. Raised by the state, Burke has grown up as a witness to and a victim of various violent acts against children. By the time Burke reaches adulthood, he has already served time in prison and has developed the fine-tuned skills of stealth, intuition, and survival. In the vein of the hard-boiled fiction genre, Burke broods, tangles with some bad guys, and trades love interests with each book. The parallels end there, however, since Burke is also single-mindedly obsessed with maiming, killing, or otherwise destroying the lives of child abusers, molesters, and purveyors of child pornography.

The real-life Vachss knows whereof he speaks. A long-time child advocate and lawyer representing the interests of children, Vachss is overwhelmingly acquainted with the violations committed against young people. He has stated publicly that, in order for readers to accept his fiction, he tones down the depravity of the real-life experiences of children—otherwise, he would be accused of being excessively gruesome or overly dramatic.

Reading his books, ingesting the horror of the "fictional" abuse in those

pages, leads me to wonder if we, as a society, are capable of knowing and accepting as true exactly how much more horrible the whole truth is. What about the inner workings of the children themselves—their reaction to abuse? How many go on to repeat the cycle and commit the same crimes as adults? How many turn their anger inward and end up dead too soon? How many ever find peace after losing their childhood, their innocence, so painfully?

The horror of Vachss' subject matter, therefore, demands the cold-bloodedness of a hard-boiled hero. Only Burke—or Batman, for that matter—has the single-minded fury and grim determination to be an avenger worthy of the task. The cruelty meted out by a child abuser deserves an equally vicious response. Before Vachss' protagonists, though, there was never a symbolic protector for children in adult fiction who cared as much. We all agree children can not easily protect themselves, and as marginal characters in adult fiction, no one has considered them worthy of protection to the degree Vachss suggests.

In both Burke's and Batman's world—where victimized children must be taken as seriously as a victimized adult—the only saving graces are honesty and reliability. The world as Vachss writes it can easily be reduced to black and white. A character is either honest with self and others . . . or not. The reader assigns respect and worth according to a character's willingness to face truth—no matter how painful or horrific—either from the beginning or at some point later in the story.

Honesty and reliability, however, have nothing to do with public disclosure of personal information or cooperation with the "citizens" of the world—i.e. the government, the people listed in the telephone book, taxpayers, and those who can be found. It has everything to do with being true to the self and to the few people whom one has grown to love and trust. Burke's

method of operation relies on a number of highly specialized, secretive, and deceptively powerful cronies. Without their help and their mostly silent emotional support, Burke would be nothing. Like Batman, Burke is humble. Exactly like Batman, Burke has trained for years to evade the nosy, root out evil, and do it all with a breath-taking efficiency born of a finely honed network—only Burke's network is human, while Batman's is mostly technological.

Due to the stark contrast between the otherworldly microcosm created by the characters of Vachss' novels and the everyday world we all recognize, all of Vachss' stories fall into the realm of speculative fiction: a bit of horror, fantasy, and science all thrown together. The bubble of safety and serenity found in Burke's circle of friends is indirectly proportional to the ugliness of the predators they in turn stalk. In reaction to the monsters they battle, the characters burrow out their own equally fantastical world—a hidden hi-tech lab disguised under a junk yard, the mysterious back rooms and dojo above a grimy, tourist-hostile Chinese restaurant, the racetrack-like, booby-trapped perfection of a seemingly beat-up Plymouth—until the reader realizes this is no New York City they have ever known, nor ever will know.

Vachss extrapolates into the future the effect of this gritty, pre-apocalyptic setting in his "Underground" series of short stories. At some point in a post-holocaust age, humans have been forced underground. They have created a complex economy based on the specialty services provided by the occupants of various "tunnels." People with the most credits have the most power. Almost always, children fall victim to a variety of evils based on the unregulated trade of services for credits. A popular service is "prostitution"—although the word implies a mutually consensual arrangement and the children in the Sex Tunnels would more aptly be named "slaves."

The speculative nature of Vachss' books and stories extends well beyond its settings. To further give the reader a sense of leaving the "real" world and entering a fantastical one, Vachss dumps on us the sheer unfamiliarity of an abused child's experiences. If a child is sold by his parents in a tunnel after a nuclear apocalypse, or raped by his father in the here and now, the same sensation of unreality pervades our minds as we read the story on the page. To understand the crime, to feel empathy for the small victims, requires an imaginative leap of faith, just like any other work of speculative fiction. Unless you yourself have survived the type of abuse Vachss' children have, rest assured you will feel like you are leaping over a yawning chasm of perversity.

After eight Burke books, a short-story collection called *Born Bad*, a number of graphic novels, and another chilling, stand-alone novel called *Shells*, it comes as no surprise that Vachss would take on the Caped Crusader. By now, the reader knows that Burke will never stop hunting the hunters. Neither will Vachss, apparently. After all, what better way is there to continue the fight than to take it to a new audience? I wonder how many people will read *Batman: the Ultimate Evil* and be shocked into facing, perhaps for the first time, that the worst monsters are human? For the people who already know this fact well, one can be sure they have a friend in Vachss who, like Batman, acts "In their name!"

INSPIRED BY BATMAN?

BY CAROL PAGE

Like Japanese calligraphy, *Batman: the Ultimate Evil* is written with bold, unflinching strokes on a stark background. And few backgrounds are more bleak than Gotham City. Andrew Vachss deftly draws a world of shadows, where evil lurks in every alley and every hero

has something to hide. In this book, Bruce Wayne/the Batman decides to stop fighting criminals and, instead, strike at the heart of crime itself. With the prompting of a Child Protective Services caseworker, Bruce learns that child molestation is not only a private, family problem, but an entire industry—an industry that churns out monsters by stealing innocence.

Bruce, who lost his childhood with the death of his parents, feels profoundly concerned for these children. Searching for the underground market, he finds out that a special tour to Udon Khai, a small Asian country where sex with minors is legal, can be arranged for the right price. And with the prompting of faithful Alfred (to call them master-and-manservant would not do their relationship justice), he uncovers a secret that propels him to hunt for the kingpin of a child-prostitution ring—a secret that is ultimately about his mother.

Only when he dons the cowl and cape does Bruce come alive. When writers describe comic-book characters, they usually present thin, two-dimensional characters. Unsurprisingly, therefore, minor characters in this book are too hastily drawn for us to sink our teeth into. But Bruce does not suffer this problem. The Batman is a multilayered character, made real through the pain he shoulders every day.

The book's flaws are minor but real. How many different ways can you refer to the Batman? Bruce Wayne. The millionaire playboy. The tall man. Vachss uses them all, and the constant struggle to keep up with the epithets threw me out of the book. Like the comic book it draws from, *The Ultimate Evil* deals with only one plot, with no real subplots. Some people may consider that boring.

A major strength is the dialogue, which chills to the bone. One slick scumbag defends his tastes: "Are we not the true child advocates? After all, what good is the child's right to say 'No' to sex without the equal right to say 'Yes'?"

The book loses some of its gritty realism when the Batman leaves Gotham for a despicably Udon Khai. The story moves from an essentially internal struggle to an external one as he rallies support from the local people, who have had their daughters and sons stolen, or sold them in order to stay alive.

After Vachss describes the acts committed against children, we do not want the major criminal to just die. We want him to suffer. This is both praise of the handiwork of a craftsman who can encapsulate evil in the space of a few pages, and a cry against the knowledge that such people exist. And they do exist. An essay in the back proves the existence of the international child-sex industry, with reference to NAMBLA (the North American Man/Boy Love Association), the Human Rights Watch, and ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism).

Bruce Wayne chants a desperate mantra, "It's not enough. It's not enough." Yes, even after he strikes against evil, it still survives. But with warriors like the Batman, and Andrew Vachss himself, we can rest a little easier knowing they're around.

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Strega: A Novel, Knopf, New York, 1987; 293 pages



Quarantine and Permutation City by Greg Egan

Quarantine by Greg Egan
HarperPrism, New York, 1995
\$4.50 PB; 280 pages
(Previously published by Legend
Books, London, 1992; PB; 248 pages.)

Permutation City by Greg Egan
HarperPrism, New York, 1995
\$4.99 PB; 341 pages
(Previously published by Millennium, London, 1994; TPB; 310 pages.)

THE SCIENCE FICTION OF GREG EGAN: AS HARD AS IT GETS

BY LUCY COHEN SCHMEIDLER

Some science fiction is called "hard" because it deals with minor extrapolations from today's technology, because it involves extrapolation from physical rather than biological or social sciences, or because it recounts the lives and working habits of plausible scientists. Meanwhile, other stories are identified as "hard sf" only because they conform to the known laws of physics and take place in plausible universes. But just how much hard sf actually involves extrapolation from current science?

One answer is the work of Australia's hot young star Greg Egan, who has produced two mind-blowing novels in the strictest tradition of science-rooted, hard science fiction.

Quarantine extrapolates from quantum theory to visible phenomena, and *Permutation City* explores what happens when one pushes computer simulation to its limits—and then transcends those limits. Can there be immortality in a finite universe? Does it matter? In both these books, Egan takes the most abstract of theoretical scientific concepts and gives them meaning at the gut level.

In *Quarantine*, the stars have been completely invisible since the night of 15 November 2034, when an impene-

trable, spherical "Bubble" manifested, cutting the solar system off from the rest of the universe. When Laura Andrews, who has been severely retarded since birth, disappears from a secure room in the Hilgemann Institute, Nick Stavrianos is hired to "find Laura Andrews and return her safely to the Hilgemann—or to locate her remains, if she's dead—and to gather sufficient evidence to ensure that those responsible for her abduction can be prosecuted." Aside from the fact that no one should have anything to gain by kidnapping Laura, who's hardly more than a vegetable and whose family isn't rich, it seems like a fairly routine case for a private investigator.

But once Nick starts investigating the route by which Laura was probably abducted, Nick gets drawn into a much more complicated situation than he expected, leading to an explanation of the Bubble itself. I won't try to explain the resolution; I'll only comment that it completely changed the way I think about such chance events as the dealing of a solitaire hand.

In *Permutation City*, Paul Durham has become fascinated by the phenomenon of "Copies," computer simulations of real people that behave exactly as the people on whom they are based would behave under identical circumstances. Taking the question of whether or not the Copies have subjective experiences as irrelevant (the Copies themselves say they do, of course), Paul wants to know how much their computer representation can be spread among different machines; run in short, cut-up time slots; and otherwise distorted without affecting their behavior.

Maria DeLuca is an Autoverse addict, one of seventy-three humans who spend all their free time modifying computer models of primitive life in an attempt to provoke the beginning of evolutionary behavior. Peer is the Copy of David Hawthorne, who was

an up-and-coming executive until he died at the age of forty-six in a fall while rock-climbing. Peer is left without the resources for a successful virtual "life" among the wealthy Copies that unofficially control the corporations which their originals ran before their deaths.

What do these people have in common? Each has a life-long interest that a virtual Copy of him or herself would happily study for the rest of a subjective eternity. Egan employs the common fictional technique of switching among several viewpoint characters as an illustration of running many separate processes on the same hardware. At the same time, the chapter subheadings—which, like the lines of the book's introductory poem, are all anagrams of the book's title—demonstrate the splitting of the processes into "slices" which need not be run in a standard order.

In an interview in the July 1994 issue of *Eidolon: The Journal of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Egan describes his forthcoming book, *Distress*, as his "third, and probably last, subjective cosmology novel," and says it is

about a science journalist covering the Einstein Centenary Conference on Theories of Everything, which is taking place on Steeles—an artificial, bioengineered coral island run by anarchists....

Egan is also the author of many short stories, which have appeared in such magazines as *Analog Science Fiction and Fact*, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, and the *British Interzone*, as well as in various Australian magazines and anthologies.

I have heard that Egan cannot do characterization, and I've even seen it blamed on his own supposed lack of sociability. For myself, I can only say that I find his characters fully realized and believable, if frequently cold.

But the empathy needed to model another person's thoughts and emotions is quite different from the sociability required to enjoy interacting with another person, empathy being an entirely internal process.

I would not say that an author and his characters are unrelated, but the characters show only those aspects of an author which he or she chooses to insert into his or her fiction, which, for many readers, may be the most important aspects, whether or not they resemble the self he or she presents to friends and acquaintances. Egan's characters do frequently seem lacking in warmth, which may result in some readers' not sympathizing with them or not caring about their fate. But this turning off occurs less when one reads than when one is taking a break (to eat, to sleep, to put in a day's work). While reading, the reader is not experiencing the characters' company but lives their problems from the inside. And the characters have such interesting problems.

Quarantine's Nick Stavrianos is a man with a head full of neurological modifications, engaged in a very lonely profession. All the principle characters in *Permutation City* are monomaniacs, with obsessions that take priority over everything else in their lives, including

love and friendship, but who promise to be good for an eternity of study.

In both books, the viewpoint characters are introduced with passages of detailed subjective experience. Nick explains how one of his neural modifications, *The Night Watchman*, takes messages while he sleeps (which appear in his mind when he wakes as just so much knowledge). He then relates the information he receives this way regarding the Laura Andrews case. We meet Paul Durham as he experiences one version of himself waking as a Copy, and then discovering that he cannot get himself erased. I don't think Egan's characters are necessarily hard for sf readers to relate to, although it may be hard to admit publicly that one enjoys relating to such nerds.

Egan's justly celebrated short stories—many of which have been collected in the British *Axiomatic* (also forthcoming from HarperCollins)—include "The Moral Virologist" (*Pulp* issue #18, Summer 1990), in which a religious bigot designs a super, AIDS-like virus to kill everyone who engages in any act of sex outside one lifelong, heterosexual marriage bond; and "The Extra" (*Asimov's SF*, January 1993), in which a man has many clones of himself created, to be available as spares, so

that when he gets old he can have his brain transplanted into a younger body.

Egan's stories build to a moment of illumination that leaves a sharp afterimage in the reader's mind. His novels, in which the illumination emerges more gradually, can effect a long-term change in the reader's perception of reality; but this new perception is as coolly rational as the old. Egan's metaphysics is strongly grounded in physics, avoiding any hint of mysticism.

I consider Egan the most impressive really hard sf writer at work today, if not of all time. Of course, one of the factors that makes his work so impressive is the fact that it extrapolates from particularly exciting current developments in theoretical science. While it's obvious that many stories of adventure on Mars or Venus—stories which were considered scientifically plausible at the time they were written—seem more like fantasy today, the reverse is also true: that is, if Egan's novels could have been read fifty years ago, they would have been taken as a wild mish-mash of absurd philosophy, not science.

Axiomatic, Millennium, London, 1995;
TPB; 290 pages

II

The Psalms of Herod by Esther Friesner

The Psalms of Herod
by Esther M. Friesner
White Wolf (Borealis), US, 1995
US\$5.99/CANADA\$7.99 PB; 479 pages

THE HEADLIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

BY ELIZABETH BARRETTE

Enter the world of Stead and Grange and Coop, a world which will make you long for the relative sanity of a dark alley. Devastated by a terrible eco-

catastrophe, the earth no longer offers easy sustenance. The man who rules a Stead, as an *alph*, rules life itself. He decides who sires children on which women (for women grow fertile only once or twice a year), and if the *alph* so demands, an infant born flawed—or even of the wrong sex—must be abandoned on the hillside. The law of God and the law of man alike leave little place for women, who live only as chattel to continue the race.

Becca of Wiseways Stead seems, at first glance, to live as happily as a woman can in this world. Her father

Paul, *alph* of Wiseways, favors her; the local midwife thinks highly of her intelligence and offers to teach her; and Becca even fancies Jamie, one of the young men. But a strange vision haunts Becca, pointing out the intolerable gap between justice and custom. Becca hears the voices of the babies left to die on the hillsides. She questions the "always was, always will" attitude that pervades her culture. When the laws of that culture permit the murder of Jamie and then Paul, Becca takes her infant sister Shifra—who also would have been killed—and flees into the wilderness.

Becca decides to journey to the distant city where her brother lives and seek justice, for Paul's death came in ritual combat and his opponent cheated by using city-made poison. That, Becca believes she can avenge. On the way, she encounters Gilber Livvy, a man unlike any she has known; a "squadra" of semi-lawless men; and a band of children, once of the steads, desperately trying to wrest a living from the wastelands. Becca begins as a near-fit for her society, just a bit too wise and willful, but after her society destroys all that she holds dear, she takes a wrecking ball to several of their cherished institutions. Two-thirds into the book, women call her a devil, but in truth she has become a legend.

Esther Friesner spins a compelling tale. Her world rustles and crunches underfoot, dusty and smashed and stubborn. It's not a nice place to visit, and no sane person would want to live there, but the book grabs hold of you and makes you care what happens. Several times during the course of the book, you can spot turning points where things ought to have gone right in a

decent world, but here they wrench themselves awry. The characters have lives and feelings as knotted as hedge-wood. They survive, as their ancestors survived, but unlike their ancestors they lift up their heads and start making changes. They take the hard path—and where there is no path, they make one, hacking and battering through all the obstacles. Eventually, some of the obstacles learn to get out of their way.

This story deals with all the hottest issues: rape, religious bigotry and theocracy gone mad, infanticide, domestic violence, reproductive freedom, rampant misogyny, prejudice against Jews and gays, abuse of power, ecological disasters and their aftermath—but mostly the sheer, boneheaded brutality of human beings who are convinced of their own righteousness. Only someone morally disturbed could get to the end without wanting to strangle any of the supporting characters.

Friesner doesn't pull any punches; she describes the necessary atrocities in a style I can only call "understated graphic," which does flawless justice to the attitudes it illustrates. I admire

her skill in bringing the future within reach; she bends the language a bit here, a touch there, to give you a feel for the differences imparted by time and travail. That rare excellence lets you hear the world through the characters' ears, in their own words. Esther Friesner shows you in no uncertain terms that most of these folks consider their appalling behavior *normal*, and then she shows you what they do to people *they* consider abnormal. O kettle, thou art black as pitch.

I cannot say I exactly enjoyed this book, but I certainly appreciated it. If nothing else, it makes a smashing example of Just How Bad Things Could Get. Fair warning: If you are sensitive to violence against women and children, even in fiction, you should probably give this one a miss. For those who can maintain a sense of distance, I highly recommend it. Setting, plot, and characterization combine for a seething read. Watch for its sequel, *The Sword of Mary*, coming in October 1996. I hear the nasty patriarchs get more of what they deserve.

II

Pirates of the Universe by Terry Bisson

Pirates of the Universe by Terry Bisson
Tor Books, New York, 1996
US\$22.95/CANADA\$33.95 HC; 285 pages

A CATALOG OF UNDERWEAR

BY MELENEY COIT

Terry Bisson has written a spoof of the grand old tradition of science fiction, in which uniformed men exist to save and explain the universe and women exist to take off their underwear and aid the brave and intelligent men in their quests. Bisson constantly undercuts this grand old story: our hero is a space pilot whose greatest goal in life is to live in a Disney theme park; his leisure

time on Earth is spent chasing a construct from room to virtual room as her lingerie becomes more and more revealing, and he is so distracted by his desire for comfort, money, and the construct that he keeps forgetting a package which would involve him in the exciting, high-stakes plot.

Ultimately, however, I missed Bisson's biting wit and sociological satire, as shown in his short story collection, *Bears Discover Fire*. There is some sociological satire here, a shadow of Bisson's skill: wars persist without their human makers because the battling machines have learned to duplicate themselves; a world of great poverty manages to put shuttles into space to kill strange beings for currency; TVs generate a pastiche

of images from former sitcoms which people find comforting; and the space orbital was built by Disney as a theme park. But the book was too long for its wit: frankly, I got tired of the careful detailing of won'en's lingerie, and the humor which am used me at the beginning of the book annoyed me at the end. All satires have the danger of duplicating the kind of story at which they mean to poke fun, and Bisson, portraying self-involved men and titillating women, came too close for my tastes to telling a grand-old science-fiction story.

Bears Discover Fire, Orb Books, New York, 1993; US\$12.00/CANADA\$17.95
TPE; 254 pages

II

A Striving After Wind

by Michael Ford

Illustrated by David Grilla

I KNEW WHEN I SAW HIM THAT STANLEY WAS A STORM CHASER like me. A grocery store isn't the best place to hide in weather like that, what with all that glass, and people were shouting as they tried to cram themselves under the check-out counters, but Stanley just leaned against a cigarette rack. He did look a little grim, staring at the camera and binoculars hanging around his neck, with his stocky frame hunched down as if he was trying to fold himself in half, but he wasn't frightened. I guess I would have to say he was bitter. He looked angry and bitter, as if this was a necessary evil, waiting for the storm to pass, like paying bills or going to the doctor.

So I wondered, why would he be doing this if it only made him bitter?

The glass rattled and the wind blasted like a freight train jumping its tracks, but I saw the tornado outside veer sharply across the street, so I knew it wouldn't blow the windows out or tear the roof off. All the same, it was still dangerously close when Stanley surprised me by running out the door. I strolled after him as the sirens started wailing. I rated the tornado an F-1, and listening to the news later, I learned I was right. It had cut a path through town about a mile long, breaking a lot of windows and a couple of arms, but not much more than that.

Anyway, I shot the tornado with my video camera, then I looked at Stanley. He wasn't taking pictures with the camera. He was scanning the clouds with his binoculars, and that surprised me even more, so I stepped over to him.

"All you'll see is gray," I said.

"What?" He barked it at me with a voice filled with gravel, as if he had quit smoking just last year.

"The angle is too narrow; you won't see anything but gray."

He lowered the binoculars and looked me over once, then returned to his study of the clouds. "I know."

By this time the tornado was rumbling out of town—even the noise was fading—but Stanley kept searching the clouds. I was getting curious but I didn't want to ask him outright what he was doing, so I said, "What's your name?"

"Stan Jordan."

"Jordan. That's funny. I thought I knew all the storm chasers around here."

He lowered the binoculars. He carefully polished the lenses with his flannel shirt and replaced the cap. "I'm not from Wisconsin. I'm from Des Moines."

"I'm from Chicago, myself," I said, and then I got an idea. All my friends had dropped out this year, and I hadn't thought I would get bored going it alone, but I *was* getting really bored after all, so I said, "Hey, you want to buddy up? I need a partner."

He looked me over again. "Not really."

"Let me buy you lunch, then. Got time for lunch?"

He hooked his thumbs into his belt and hitched up his pants. He said all right, and I got the feeling he wasn't as unfriendly as he looked; he was just angry or bitter or had his mind on something else. So we walked over to a coffee shop on the nearest corner. It hadn't been damaged, but the people inside were pretty shaken up. Everybody was still jabbering about the tornado, and they were just starting to serve people again. Our waitress shook so badly she could barely write down our order.

Stanley wanted coffee. "Black," he said, "and keep it coming." She filled our cups to the top and walked away. Stanley picked his up in both hands like a warm bowl of soup, blew on it, took a sip, then looked at me. "So what do you do?"

"I'm a freelance graphics designer," I said. "I work for a bunch of agencies downtown. In Chicago. Except when I come out here every year and chase storms. My girlfriend says I waste too much time that way, which is funny, because she's usually out here with me."

He snickered and took another sip, and then he said, "I get the same thing from my wife."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a truck driver. I cover Iowa, Minnesota, the Dakotas, most of the Midwest. Here." He set down the cup and pulled out his wallet. He flipped to a picture of a woman standing next to a big truck, one of those big twenty- or thirty-axled things. "That's my rig. And that's Maggie. *Magg*, I call her. Like I said, she gets angry because I don't spend enough time at home, between the truck driving and this."

"How'd you get started?"

"Started what?"

"Chasing storms."

He looked thoughtful, like he didn't know what I was talking about. Then he said, "From Josh, I guess. That's him." He flipped to a picture of a small boy, about ten years old, standing on a porch in front of a house. He was thin and frail, with blond hair almost a little too long. "Must have got his smarts from Mags. Her father's got a degree in math or something. Josh read about thunderstorms one day and decided to make a lightning rod. He made it out of one of those—what are they called?—those aluminum washing line things, the ones that spin. He wanted to put it on the roof."

"That's dangerous."

"You think I don't know? I told him to get rid of it. You know what he did, instead?"

"What?"

"He snuck out one night during a storm and set it up in the field next to our house. Almost got himself killed. Damn thing got four solid hits and the grass was burned black for five feet around. Lucky it didn't burn the house down."

"What did you do?"

"What did I do? I punished him! I bent the thing up and threw it away, and I grounded him for two months. He didn't talk to me the whole time."

The waitress arrived with our food. Stanley folded up his wallet and stuck it back in his pocket. "What about you?"

"Me? Well, this is going to sound crazy—" I stopped while the waitress fussed with our plates. When she went away, I said, "You probably won't believe it, but I'll tell you anyway. Some friends of my girlfriend have a house in the country, almost up near Waukegan. We used to go there sometimes in the summer. We'd have picnics out on this hillside, just my girlfriend and me, because it was peaceful and you could see the lake in the distance. You know, Lake Michigan?" He nodded. I went on, "Anyway, we fell asleep, up there on this hillside, and when we woke up there were clouds coming overland from the north, and it was starting to drizzle, and they were starting to flash with intracloud discharge."

He sat up at that, and this was when I knew him for a thunderstorm freak, rather than a tornado freak like myself. "These were cumulonimbus?" he said. "From the north?"



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"That's right. So we started packing up because we knew we had to get out of there quick. We weren't scared or anything. We were just laughing and cracking jokes, trying to get everything packed up before we got drenched. And my girlfriend, she said I should run down to the car to get a trash bag, because she didn't want to pack the trash in with the stuff we didn't eat yet. So I ran down to the car."

I stopped again and looked around. The waitress was gone, but there were people in the booths on both sides. So I leaned close to him and said quietly, "This is the crazy part. So don't laugh, okay?"

"All right."

"You know how in a thunderstorm you can feel the static in the air? You know how your hair stands up and you can hear metal hissing?" He nodded. I said, "Well, that's what it felt like, only worse, like I've never felt it before. I tasted metal in my mouth and my fillings hurt, like they wanted to jump out of my teeth. But I didn't think about that 'cause I was running down to the car. It was about twenty or thirty meters away, and the slope was shallow but filled with these little hillock things, like large grass-covered rocks or something, and I had to jump from one to another to get down the slope. And this is the crazy part. I was about halfway down when I jumped from this one little hillock, and I started to float."

I paused to see how he was taking this. He wasn't laughing. He just stared at me with rapt attention, very serious. But I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, so I went on. "I didn't really float. I kept moving forward, but I hung in the air a lot longer than I should have, and I jumped a lot farther. I jumped over two more little hillocks, and I almost twisted my ankle when I landed because I misjudged it. But I kept running. Everything was happening so fast, and we had just woken up, and I was light-headed from the low pressure zone. I guess I wasn't fully awake. So I kept running down the slope, and every time I jumped off one of those rocks I hung in the air just a little longer. It was weird. It felt like I'd jump into the sky if I could just push off hard enough."

"So what happened?"

I shrugged. "Nothing. I got to the car and looked up at my girlfriend. She was packing stuff up and hadn't seen it, so I got the trashbag and went back. I didn't even think about it until later when I realized that it wasn't a dream; I wasn't that much asleep. So I told her about it, and of course she didn't believe me, and it got to be kind of a joke with us, but we got to talking about the weather, and that's how we started this storm chasing stuff."

I looked at him again. I couldn't read anything in his expression. He wasn't laughing or arguing with me or anything. He just glanced down at his coffee, then looked up again and said, "Hell, that's something I'd like to see. You still want to buddy up?"

"Wait a minute, Stanley. This happened five years ago. And it never happened again."

"So what? Maybe you'll get lucky this year."

SO THAT WAS IT; we were partners. Since my car was rented, we returned it and loaded all my gear into Stanley's. He had one of those four-wheel-drive things with lots of room in the rear boot. All the same, my stuff had to go in the back seat because the boot was filled with a lot of his junk, nothing to do with weather, just suitcases and car parts and junk like that. Which was good, because some of my stuff was fragile and it rode better on a cushion. His own gear was primitive—just a radio for collecting data from the local weather services and a stack of Midwest map blanks for plotting fronts—so I spent our first couple of hours together explaining laptops and global weather tracking analysis software and download via modem from the NWS information service.

I'd been watching a front swell up from the Gulf over the last few days which was so filled with moisture we were bound to get some pretty heavy storms once it hit the cold air up around the northern half of Missouri. So we headed south through Illinois and rolled into Missouri, watching the horizon for cumulus clouds. We found them the next day in Saint Joseph, little white puffs trundling along at four

thousand feet, like sheep grazing up there in a field of blue grass, and the NWS reported satellite and radar images of a bundle of cells already developing into cumulonimbus almost on the Kansas border.

We spotted the thunderheads just before dusk, great big towering things like dark fortresses reaching up to thirty or forty thousand feet, moving maybe twenty kilometers an hour. Stanley stopped the car and I jumped out to shoot them. Tornadoes are better, but sometimes you can sell footage of developing storms, especially shot from a distance.

Stanley jumped out too and scanned the clouds with his binoculars. Rain was already starting, but there didn't seem to be any flashes developing, and he asked where we should go next. I checked the computer. The data by then were a couple hours old, but I figured south and east, maybe around Sedalia. Predicting lightning is more art than science. It's like fishing for trout and trying to decide to put popcorn or cheese on the hook; both are kind of ridiculous, but both have been known to work, and there's just no hard information on what a trout likes to eat.

So we headed south, but the storm system overtook us about halfway to Sedalia, and that slowed us down, so we reached Sedalia about eleven o'clock at night. The rain was really pelting down. Stanley drove with his hands tight on the wheel and a scowl on his face, and his head hunched down between his shoulders as if he thought the rain would break through the roof of the car and soak him. We found a hotel and pulled into the parking lot. I grabbed my gear and my suitcase—it was all in waterproof bags—and Stanley said he had a big umbrella in the back. So we walked to the back and he lifted the hatch, and I stood there under the open hatch while he threw his junk around looking for the umbrella.

In among the junk I spotted something funny-looking. I just saw a part of it. It was made out of copper or bronze, and it was round and attached to a wooden frame. "What's that?" I asked.

He glanced at it. "That's one of Josh's contraptions."

"What's it doing in your car?"

All right, I know. I shouldn't ask questions like that. But I was wondering why his son's project was taking up space in his car, and I didn't think until right afterwards that maybe I was a little impolite demanding information like that. And Stanley gave me this very strange look and he said, "Let's get something to eat."

"Shouldn't we check in?"

"Let's eat. I have to ask you something."

So I shrugged and we carried our wet bags into this little restaurant that was part of the hotel. The restaurant was dim and cool and almost deserted. The waitress showed us to a booth with a window overlooking the parking lot, except we

couldn't see the parking lot because it was pitch dark out there and the rain was coming down in sheets. The table had a candle in one of those holders made out of wrinkled red glass, and as I slid into the seat the flame seemed to flicker in time with the rain knocking against the window. Stanley went off to call his wife, which he did every couple of days or so, leaving me alone in the booth.

I guess I should tell you, at this point I was starting to get a little concerned about Stanley. Sometimes I got the feeling he wasn't really listening when we talked, like he was thinking very seriously about something else. And every once in a while I would catch him giving me this sidelong glance, studying me, as if he was trying to figure me out, and I got the feeling he was trying to come to some sort of decision about me. And there in Sedalia I guessed that he had come to that decision, so I was a little nervous when he came back a few minutes later and slid into the seat across from me.

He waved the waitress over. We glanced over the menus and ordered, and when the waitress walked away, Stanley leaned back against the seat. He regarded me, his face hidden in the flickering shadows cast by the candle while the rain tapped at the window like something trying to get in.

After a moment he leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. Suddenly, for a guy who drove a truck and lived in Des Moines and swore a little too much, he looked quite dignified.

"That thing in the car," he said, "that thing my son built. It wasn't the lightning rod that got me interested in thunderstorms, it was that . . . that thing."

"What is it?"

"I'll be damned if I know. Josh was the genius, not me."

I looked at him. "What do you mean, 'was'?"

Stanley rubbed his mouth, then folded his hands on the table again. "Josh was always reading. I don't know what he got out of it, but he was always reading about lightning and static charges and electrical theory. And two years ago, he built that thing. Said he wanted to fire it up during the next thunderstorm. I thought he was going to kill himself, like he almost did with the lightning rod. I told him to get rid of it, but the little bastard never listened to me. He hid it in the garage. A couple days later a storm came in, and that night we were woken up by footsteps on the roof. Mags thought it was a prowler. She said to go take a look, so I did. It was Josh."

"On the roof? During a thunderstorm?"

"Can you believe it? He wouldn't come down, so I went looking for the ladder. I found it propped against the house by the garage, and next to the ladder was that thing he built. He'd used it on himself."

"What did it do to him?" I was surprised to find that I was speaking in whispers.

Stanley looked at me for another long moment, then he said, "Lightning was striking all over. I was scared out of my pants, but I went up after him, and I'll be damned if I know why we didn't get hit. I mean, we were the tallest things around and it was right on top of us. Josh stood right out on the peak, just above the front door. I yelled at him but he wouldn't come away from the edge, so I walked out after him. And he jumped. Right over the edge. Except he didn't fall. He went up, straight up, I swear to God, like some sort of kite or something."

He stared at me and I stared at him, and the waitress suddenly appeared with an armload of plates. She set them down with a clatter that startled us. Stanley leaned back again and rubbed his eyes. The waitress looked from me to Stanley and back, like she wanted to know if we needed anything else, but Stanley was rubbing his eyes and I was staring at him blankly, so she turned and walked away, leaving us with the red candlelight and the pattering against the window.

After a long time Stanley dropped his hands into his lap. "I tried to grab him. I almost fell off the roof running over there to grab him. But by the time I got there he was out of my reach. So I just stood there and shouted his name while he floated up into the rain and the lightning."

I didn't say anything. I didn't know whether to believe him or not, I mean, I guessed he was telling me this because he thought I would believe him, because something like it had happened to me. But what happened to me wasn't quite the same thing, and it had happened five years earlier, and over the years I had kind of stopped believing it. It had become just one of those things we joked about, one of those things that sort of becomes part of the legends of your life. So I kind of half believed him and half not believed him, and for just about the first time in my life I had no idea what to say.

He finally glanced up at me. "Here, look at this." He dug a picture from his wallet and passed it to me. In the flickering red shadows from the candle, I saw a dark spot against a gray background. "That's him," Stanley said.

I looked closer. I guess it could have been a body, though it could also have been a plane or a bird or any of a hundred other things. "Are you sure?" I asked. He nodded. I said, "What were you doing with a camera up on the roof?"

He looked at me quizzically, and then he blinked. "I took that picture just eight months ago."

I have to say, my jaw dropped. "Last season?"

Gazing at the picture in my hand, Stanley nodded. "I've seen him three times all together. That was the last time, when I snapped that, all the way down in Springfield. I know it's him. I saw him clearly through the binoculars." I looked at the picture once more and still couldn't tell what it was, so I slid it back across the table. He didn't pick it up.

"Mags doesn't believe me. She wasn't there; she didn't see it. She thinks he just ran away. Said she wasn't surprised. Between that and all the work I've been missing, she's about to leave me. Don't know if I blame her."

He fell silent and we both stared at our food. I still couldn't think of anything to say. I doubt there *was* anything to say. Stanley couldn't have heard, anyway. He was in some world of his own, staring at the table, talking just to hear his own voice.

"I tried that thing on myself a few days later. But I didn't have the guts to jump off the roof, like Josh did. It took all the nerve I had just to walk outside during a thunderstorm. I jumped from a tree instead. Didn't feel a thing. I just fell like a rock." He waved a hand absently through the air. "I don't know, I'm too heavy, or the wrong composition, or something. It just doesn't work for me."

Suddenly he looked angry. His face turned red, the way it did earlier when a car had cut us off outside Saint Joseph. His eyes bulged out, and he could hardly look at me. And the more he talked, the angrier he got and the harder he tried to keep it in. "But you're small. You're what, five-foot-ten? And it happened to you, that one time. You're the right composition, or you have the right charge, or whatever the hell it was Josh did, you can do it, too." And he got still angrier, and I finally realized that he was about to ask a big favor from someone he hardly knew, and it must have been very difficult for him, a man like that, and I could understand that. He did manage to lower his voice and look me steady in the eye, as he said, "Go up and look for him. For me. If he's alive, help him down. If he's dead, bring back his body. Or at least tell me if he's even still there. Anything. I've got to know."

So there I was, sitting in this little hotel restaurant in Sedalia, listening to a crazy person ask me to do something even crazier, to go up in the sky and look for his dead son without a plane or even a parachute. I stared at my cold food for a long time, feeling his eyes on me as he waited for me to answer, and finally I glanced up and looked at him and I said, "Yeah, okay. You got it."

Well, why not? I mean, think about it. I still only half believed his story anyway, and if he was telling the truth then I should certainly try it, and if he was lying I was no worse off unless he asked me to leap from a building or something like that. And I really did float that one day. Really. So I at least had to give it a try.

WE STAYED in Sedalia for four days, until another front started through Nebraska. We drove west and north toward it until we saw the first flashes just past Hastings. When the front was only a couple kilometers away, Stanley pulled off the road and we got out.

I paused to watch the storm. The intracloud discharge had been going on for some time and the flashes were just

beginning to reach the ground. You can't see the stepped leaders and return strokes, of course, since they happen way too fast, but I had caught a leader on camera once and that's always something to talk about, so I spent a few moments taking some video of it. By the time I turned, Stanley had pulled the machine from his car and dragged it over to a clump of trees beside the road.

I walked over, and this was the first close look I got of the thing Josh had built. It was maybe only half a meter on a side, with this ball of copper suspended in a wooden frame. The ball was attached to a gear train with a large hand crank on one side, so I knew it was supposed to turn. The underside of the ball scraped against a bed of steel wool or something like that, you could see the track the steel wool had made, all around the ball. And the top rubbed a row of cloth flaps stapled to a wooden rod. Wires running from the cloth came together at an iron pipe hanging on the same side as the crank, and that was all. It looked like some sort of static electricity experiment from the last century. I would have laughed, but Stanley was dead serious, so I just said, "What do we do?"

He glanced at the storm, as if gauging its speed and distance. The rumblings of thunder were reaching us there under the tree, echoing out across the flat Nebraska grassland like someone calling someone's name, and I thought of Stanley up there on his roof at night, in the middle of a thunderstorm just like this, looking up in the rain and blackness, wondering why he wasn't getting zapped as he called after Josh.

He looked back at the machine. "Hold that," he said, pointing at the pipe.

I picked it up and held it in my hands. Stanley turned the crank, and the gear train whined, and after a moment the ball was spinning pretty fast. I started to feel static, like one of those things you see in a children's museum where they put their hand on a great big stainless steel ball and their hair stands on end. I felt it all over my skin, and I felt my shirt start to float away from my body. Finally I asked, "How long do we keep this up?"

He shrugged and said, "I don't know," and kept turning.

After another minute or so, a funny thing happened. I started to taste metal in my mouth, just like that day five years earlier. I couldn't say what kind of metal, of course, but it was exactly the same, and I even thought my fillings were starting to hurt. I think this was the first time I started to taste Stanley really seriously, from this taste in my mouth, which I had never tasted except that one day. So in the back of my mind, I stopped scoffing and just waited to see what would happen next.

Well, nothing much happened except the storm came closer and my hands started to tingle from the pipe. I tried to ignore it, but the tingle got worse, and soon it started to

hurt, so I figured if I really was charging up like a battery, I was probably charged up enough.

"Okay, stop!" I said. "That's enough!" I dropped the pipe, and Stanley let go of the crank. The ball kept turning for a few moments, winding down with a heavy gear-sound until it finally came to a stop. "What now?" I asked.

Stanley looked around. The storm was maybe a kilometer off and the rumble of thunder inside the cloud was louder, and each strike of lightning seemed to last a little longer. "Up in the tree, I guess."

So I walked over to the tree, and I have to say I did feel kind of bouncy and light. But I couldn't really tell—it might just have been the atmosphere or the feeling of static in my shoes or just my imagination. Anyway, the tree was an oak with low branches, so I grabbed the nearest branch and put a foot up on the bole, and then I paused.

"I just thought of something. How do I get down?"

"Jump. That's the whole idea."

"No. I mean, if this works, how do I get down from up there? Josh was the genius, if he couldn't figure it out, I certainly can't."

Stanley frowned as if he had never thought about this, and then he started to look angry again. "Don't worry about it. If you get up there, you'll figure it out."

Well, I didn't like the sound of that, but I climbed up anyway and balanced myself on the branch. The wind had picked up and the leaves of the tree were starting to thrash. "Should I flap my arms?" I asked.

"Stop joking around. Just do it."

He was right, I guess. So I jumped, and landed solidly, and I said, "Nothing happened," because he was glaring at me as if I had done something wrong.

"How do you feel?"

I grabbed my shirt and pulled it away from my chest. "Still charged."

"Try again. Go a little higher."

So I went a little higher and jumped again, and still nothing happened. I tried two or three more times, going a little higher each time, until I had gone as high as I dared. Stanley looked dissatisfied. He glanced around again and rubbed his mouth, and said, "I don't like those leaves. Maybe they're getting in the way. Let's try jumping from the car."

I didn't like that either, him saying "let's" when it was me doing the jumping, but I went over to the car and climbed up on it and jumped a few times. Now, I have to say, I felt like a fool, jumping off that car, over and over again like that, especially since people passed on the road nearby and I got a few funny looks. But that was okay. If you've ever stood in a room trying to sell your latest idea to a bunch of ad execs, that can be pretty embarrassing too, especially if they're looking like they'd rather go for an early lunch—but I'd done that lots of times, and this wasn't so bad.

Anyway, I still felt airy and light, and at the peak of each jump I thought I might actually be floating a little. But I wasn't flying, that was obvious. The light had failed because the storm had blocked the sun, and great big, heavy drops began to splatter on the car. I happened to be looking at a flash as it discharged to the ground only half a kilometer off. It rode the same channel over and over, a multiple strike, and I knew the storm had to be getting worse if the channels were holding residual charges like that, so I was ready to quit. Stanley didn't want to, but he could see I was serious, so we pulled the car under the tree and sat there to wait it out.

Stanley sat hunched down in the seat as the storm reached us, glowering at the lightning which struck all about like artillery fire and the thunder which shook the car, as if he was scared and angry at the same time. And I was beginning to understand why. After all, he had lost his son in a storm with the rain and lightning crashing all around. And Josh had understood it, at least more than Stanley did. And eventually it took Josh away. So I could see why Stanley had come to see it as some kind of adversary.

He didn't feel like talking, so I just shot the storm some more. After about an hour, I was still charged up. I had avoided touching metal or anything like that because, quite frankly, this whole thing had already gone beyond anything I knew or understood. But the car was getting stuffy, and I reached for the metal button to crack the window, and just before I touched it a blue spark leaped across the gap. It didn't hurt or anything, but I heard it crackle, and it was interesting so I did it again, and bit by bit the charge disappeared. My shirt relaxed and the taste in my mouth went away, and by the time the storm had diminished enough that we could drive, the charge was gone completely.

I asked what we should do. Stanley said we should find a hotel for the night and in the morning follow the front south and east to see if we could find another storm.

HE WAS BITTER all that night and the next day. We got up at daybreak and drove south into Kansas, then turned east to get ahead of the front. The clouds had become a dark, heavy canopy of nimbostratus that rained on us continually but never very heavy. The front had slowed during the morning, so at Concordia we turned south and the weather gradually cleared and warmed until we saw only cirrus clouds up around twenty thousand feet.

Well, that didn't last long. We were traveling south and west when the front caught up with us again, this time with a solid formation of stratus, and frankly it looked more like tornado country to me. We drove on for another hour or so, and the clouds got lower and darker. Stanley pointed at a squall line moving in from the west and said it might develop lightning. I said it probably wouldn't and we should continue

south, maybe into Oklahoma, but Stanley wasn't listening again. He kept glancing toward the squall line and poking his head out the window to watch the clouds above us.

It scared me when he drove off the road. We bounced over the shoulder and then over a ditch, and I grabbed the dashboard and shoved my feet hard into the floor, and thank God we were wearing seatbelts. We skidded to a stop and almost turned over; then the car settled back on all four wheels. I expected Stanley to apologize for driving like that, but he didn't. He set the brake and turned off the engine and jumped out without even taking out the keys.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"Look!" he called, pointing at the sky. "Look there!"

I climbed out and looked around but I didn't see anything except low clouds rolling with the wind. Stanley scanned the sky with his binoculars, mumbling to himself, and after another minute he shouted, "There!"

I looked up quickly. I felt a chill because I saw something, but it was so far away that it was like that picture he showed me—just an indistinct black shape that flitted about for a moment and then disappeared behind a fold of the clouds, that might just have been a bird or even just a leaf that was closer than we thought. But Stanley was convinced. He dropped the binoculars and raised the camera, but by then the thing was gone and he only searched through the viewfinder for a moment before lowering it again.

He didn't ask me if I saw it. He just rushed around to the back of the car and opened the hatch and pulled out the machine.

"Are we going to do this right here?" I asked.

"Yes," he said. "Hurry!" And he kept glancing up at the sky as he pulled the thing out and began to crank it.

So I grabbed up the pipe and stood there holding it while he charged me up. After a few minutes my teeth started to hurt again and my shirt stood away from my body, and when the tingling started in my hands I told him to stop. Poor Stanley was huffing and puffing by then. He stopped and the copper ball wound down.

"Try from the car," he managed to puff out.

I climbed up onto the car and started jumping, and I don't need to tell you, nothing happened again. So I jumped a few times more, and then I was getting grumpy myself because my ankles were starting to ache from all this jumping. So finally I stopped and said, "This isn't working, Stanley."

He looked at me for a long time and nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry, let's go."

So we climbed back in and drove on, and I would rather have been out in that low pressure zone rather than in the car, the atmosphere was so oppressive in there. I had seen Stanley bitter and angry, but not depressed. Now he was *really* depressed. I guess that, ever since he met me and I had

told him about that one time I floated, he had put all his hopes in me, and now that we both knew it just wasn't going to work he had nowhere to turn. So we drove on sort of half looking for a thunderstorm, feeling depressed and tired, not knowing if we were even going to try it again, and we both saw the twister at the same time.

Stanley said, "Oh hell," and I just stared. The clouds were turning to nimbostratus up ahead and the funnel was just taking shape, extending down from the ceiling pretty fast—so fast we could see it form—and somewhere in the back of my mind I remembered that this was the first time I had ever seen one from the start. I didn't even think to get footage of it, and to this day I kick myself for that.

Anyway, Stanley slowed the car, and we both watched as the funnel dropped lower and lower and finally hit the ground, and it seemed to hit with an explosion, and it quickly darkened from all the dirt and debris it was sucking up.

At that point I said what I probably should have said at first, which was, "Maybe you should turn around, Stanley."

He kind of nodded numbly and cut across the lanes, and we bounced over that grassy median part, and then we were going in the other direction. I looked back and saw that the twister was moving very fast along the road, and I started to hear the sound that it makes, that kind of hissing rumble over the sound of the engine.

Stanley gripped the wheel and didn't even look in the mirror. I glanced around and saw only trees and grass, and realized we had been driving for some time out in the open with no buildings around; the last one I remembered was a gas station some distance back. I knew Stanley remembered it too, and without saying anything we knew that's what we were heading for.

I kept looking back even though Stanley wouldn't, and I saw the tornado leap back and forth across the road, picking up great masses of dirt and pieces of trees. It stayed with us all the way to the gas station. I don't think either of us thought of just staying ahead of it until it ran out of steam, which you can do because the forward motion of tornados isn't actually that fast. But we were scared, we just wanted to get under something solid, and we thought we were far enough ahead that we could get under cover quickly enough.

So we pulled into the gas station and jumped out, and that's when I really heard how loud and close it was—when he turned off the engine and we opened the doors. I couldn't hear anything but this thunderous roar, and I glanced back once and couldn't see the top of it, just this great mass of angry cloud coming at us down the road, and suddenly the car seemed safer. But I was so frightened that I just ran, and Stanley ran too, and I couldn't believe how fast a guy like that could move. He just leaped ahead of me and ran for the

open door of this gas station. I didn't know where the people were—maybe hiding under desks or something—but Stanley made the door first, and he paused to look back at me. And then he looked at something behind me, and I glanced over my shoulder . . . and realized I wasn't going to make it.

The tornado had veered sharply off the road. It just looked like a wall of dusty cloud, and Stanley's car was rocking back and forth; so I leaped as hard as I could for the door, but the wind suddenly blasted so badly I can't even really call it a wind—it was more like a giant hand pulling me back in my leap and slamming me to the ground. Stanley crouched in the doorframe, shouting something I couldn't hear and reaching out. So I reached for him and managed to grab his hand. He held onto the doorframe and tried to pull me in, still shouting something I couldn't hear, and I was shouting, "Pull me in! Pull me in!" And that's when the tornado really hit.

It blasted out the window next to the doorframe and actually lifted me off my feet. Something solid bounced off my head. I don't know what it was, but when I looked up again, still clutching Stanley's hand, I saw this really strange expression on his face, one I hadn't seen before. He looked apologetic, almost sad. He looked like he was pleading for something—

—and I didn't know what it was until he deliberately released me.

OKAY, I KNOW. I think it's funny too that this happened right in the middle of Kansas. But don't laugh: that was just a story and this really happened. I could have been killed when Stanley let me go. It hurt, anyway, when that thing lifted me up off the ground and into the air. I never saw anything. I never saw the gas station or the ground dropping away or the car beneath me. I only saw dust and clouds, and I didn't see much of that because I couldn't breathe and I was knocked silly by this wind, because they've measured tornadic velocities at almost three hundred miles an hour, and when you're going around that fast in a circle only fifty or so meters wide, it feels like you're being crushed and torn apart at the same time. I got punched around and things hit me that I didn't even really feel; I guess I thought I was dead already. I felt dead. And I certainly wanted to be dead, not because of my injuries or anything, but just because it was so chaotic and violent that I thought I should be dead and I didn't want the logic in the world to drain away.

I think I have a theory about people dying in tornados. If they don't get hit by something that breaks their head open, they don't die either when it lifts them up. They die when it throws them back down a kilometer away or whatever. I think this is what happens because I didn't die, and the reason I didn't die is because it didn't set me down.

What happened was, some time later—and I don't know how long because my watch was gone, but it couldn't have been more than a few minutes because tornados typically don't last much longer than that; but some time later—it stopped throwing me around. I must have fallen unconscious or something. I next remember hearing this crackling sound and feeling this wind that was gusty but not nearly that strong, so I thought the tornado had set me down again.

And then I remembered that Stanley had charged me up with Josh's machine just fifteen minutes or so earlier. I still had that strange charge in me, like some kind of alien battery.

So I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was that everything was dark grey with these darker shapes passing back and forth. And the wind was coming up from under me, and that blew my theory about lying on the ground in a dusty fog, which was what it felt like.

I looked at my fingers, and I saw these sparks flying off them. That was the crackling sound, these little blue bolts stretching off my fingers into the fog about half a meter or so, like bright little lightning bolts. I figured the charge must have been pretty strong to be making visible little lightning bolts like that.

And then I realized . . . I was up in the nimbostratus. Josh's machine had worked. It only needed the extra lift from the tornado because I was so much bigger. That's when I came fully awake, and I guess I panicked a little. I screamed and got a mouthful of dust, and I started flailing around, and I spun about wondering if Josh had been this frightened when he had sailed up into the thunderstorm.

And I have to say, that was a story I completely believed by now.

So I floated for a while in that cloud, trying to breathe through the choking dust, and after the shock wore off I realized that I was cold and soaked to the skin. I pulled in my arms to hug myself and warm up, and that turned out to be something of a mistake because I spun out of control and completely lost what little sense of direction I had. But all the same, I knew I was going consistently in one direction, because it was getting colder all the time, and lighter, and then I was blinded by bright sunlight as I popped out at the top of the cloud cover.

It was beautiful, all white and shining like cotton, just like you see it from an airplane window except I was right down there with it, with these cold foggy wisps blocking my sight now and again, and I was spinning here and there, and half the time I was upside down with the sun and blue sky beneath my feet and my head stuck in this topsy-turvy sea of clouds.

That brought me to another theory, about why I didn't feel any strong wind, just what felt like a stiff breeze. Balloonists don't feel any strong wind because they're being carried along with the wind, going at the same speed while the balloon holds them up and pushes them along. Josh's

charge was my balloon. It was holding me up, and the same wind that pushed the clouds about was pushing me.

So it got very calm—except that I was getting dizzy from all that spinning around, so I experimented a little. I learned that I would more or less stop when I put my arms out, and just drift in a slow spin, and at least not get too dizzy. I spun until I righted myself and then I put my arms out, and I stopped in a more or less upright position, and I tried to relax, because my heart was beating so wildly I thought I might have a heart attack, and I figured I was pretty safe unless the static charge gave out, which was something I didn't want to think about.

I was pretty battered up, but I hadn't broken anything, though I was bruised all over from being hit by debris. The worst was a bleeding lump on my head, I guessed from being hit by whatever it was just before Stanley let me go. I knew it was bleeding because I realized it was throbbing, and I touched it without thinking, and I spun out of control. And when I got control again I looked at my fingers, and there was blood on them.

I did manage to calm down, after I realized I wasn't going to fall right away. It was so peaceful, as quiet as you can imagine; and comfortable, the only sensation being the breeze and the tingle of static that was becoming familiar. The sun was even drying my clothes out and warming me, except when the wind changed and I dipped into grey dinness. But always I popped out again and the comfortable sun would warm me again. So I laid back and floated and tried to collect my thoughts, and I guess I was in shock or something, or recovering from it, because I don't remember thinking anything significant or really being that scared for a long time, even though I should have been scared out of my wits.

Well, that didn't last, because staring at the blue sky and the sun and all those clouds that stretched everywhere like an endless prairie, I got an idea of how truly helpless I was. I was at the mercy of the wind and the sun and the temperature and the clouds, and I would most probably plunge to my death when Josh's strange charge failed, and I suddenly felt very, very alone, up there in the clouds with no way to do anything. I must have drifted like that for a couple of hours, with sun above and clouds below, thinking over and over that I would either plunge to death, or starve and end up like Josh, a decaying corpse floating around the world forever.

Then the clouds ended, and I started falling. I thought the charge had finally failed. I slid down this great mass of clouds like rolling down a hill, and I think I screamed a few times, and I plunged into the clouds and out into sunlight a few times. And then the clouds just opened up under me—I guess it was the trailing edge of the squall line—and I saw the ground far, far below. I was petrified; I thought this was it. The wind was rushing by me, and I was definitely plung-

ing downward, and I knew it would be a long fall and it would be torture every moment.

And then I slowed. I was still falling, but I slowed down. And then I stopped and buffeted about for a bit without falling anymore. My heart was beating wildly so I clinched my fists and closed my eyes and breathed deeply until I calmed down again. Then I opened my eyes, and I spun myself around to look at the clouds.

Well, they were a ways off and dropping lower; or rather, I was rising again. So I had another theory, that whatever charge in the clouds that repelled Josh's charge was present in the clear air as well. The wind had pushed me to the end of the nimbostratus formation, and I reached the end of that pool of atmospheric charge, and I fell until I hit a new electrical charge gradient, and I would follow that upward until everything equalled out again.

So I spun back around and took a look. The sun was about an hour past zenith, and down below I could see roads with cars on them. Way off to the left was a town. I had no idea of directions—I was so turned around—but it looked pretty large. I thought it might be Topeka, if I had drifted that far, or maybe Emporia. And the earth was all brown and green, and there were these little bunches of what looked like brush from this distance, but I knew they were actually stands of trees, and I swear they looked like the little clumps of trees you see on model train sets, all squashed and clumped together. I watched the cars, and I thought I saw Stanley's car, which was stupid because they all actually looked the same from that high up, just little spots moving along. But that made me think of Stanley. He was probably back there at the gas station helping them pick up the pieces, thinking all the time that he had killed me. He was probably filled with guilt, the poor guy. And then I thought, what was I worried about him for? He probably *had* killed me. I mean, how was I going to get down?

I looked at one of those distant clumps of trees, and I thought maybe, if I could break the charge I could direct my fall into one of those trees and the branches would cushion my fall, and I might get out of it with just a broken leg rather than a broken head. And that thought seemed ridiculous, because I didn't know how to break the charge. I didn't even know what the charge was for God's sake, much less how to break it or even steer myself into a tree.

So I started despairing again, as the earth floated beneath me and the sun moved in the sky. And after a while I saw a flock of birds below; I don't know what they were; they were pretty far beneath my feet, moving in a vee formation back up toward the squall line. I realized I was hungry. I thought maybe if I ever got close enough and was desperate enough, maybe I could catch a bird and eat it raw, or maybe I could eat bugs, because I'd heard they got up this high sometimes, carried on the wind, and there was certainly enough water

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Michael Ford

up here to survive. And then I thought how ridiculous that was. I couldn't catch a bug; there was no way I could catch a bug. Or a bird. Not unless it was really stupid and blundered into me, or it died above me and fell into my hands or something, and how likely was that?

And then it got worse, because I started to figure out where I was. That was Topeka or Emporia off to my left. The squall line was behind me, and I was traveling south and east at ten or fifteen thousand feet, trapped between the cold front moving down from the Rockies and the warm front coming up across the Plains States. I was probably drifting down toward Wichita, though I would probably pass it to the east before I ever got there. But the thing which was worse was this formation of dark clouds in the distance, because I knew they were part of the same frontal system, the next storm developing in the chain, and it looked like it was heading right toward me, or I toward it, as I passed through this portion of relatively stable air between storm systems.

So I WATCHED that mass of clouds over the next few hours. And sure enough we were on a collision course. I couldn't do anything to stop it. I just headed right toward it as it grew larger and larger, and I got really scared when it developed into a mature cumulonimbus.

By then the sun was going down, and I have to say it was quite spectacular. The anvil formed way up about thirty-five thousand feet—I'd had time to think now, and I was starting to get a sense of distance and direction. Anyway, it was still a couple of kilometers off when the sun went down, and as the earth below plunged into darkness with only a few sparkles where houses had lights on or cars moved on the roads below, here was this great mass of cloud suddenly lit up all orange and red—I mean, bigger than anything you've ever seen before—and it looked like some giant had sprinkled it with kerosene and set it on fire.

Eventually that beautiful light faded, and I was just drifting toward this mass that looked all dull silver and boiling in the starlight. I was almost in it when the lightning started. It looked like a bunch of photographers behind a curtain, setting off their cameras all at the same time. The peal of thunder echoed over me and behind me and back again, and it was so spectacular I just dropped my jaw and watched and completely forgot that I was about to plunge into it and die.

The great black wall grew until it blocked out the starlight, and then it got very cold and the wind started buffeting me about. I knew I was in the first tendrils of the cloud. I drifted in fog for about a minute or so, and I got soaked to the skin again, and then the first convection cell hit me.

I guess I was lucky it was an updraft. I don't remember feeling lucky. I was just petrified with fear as this warm block

of cement hit me like a car, and with a lurch like an elevator I started upward. I must have screamed again. I couldn't see anything except the black night stabbed by flashes of lightning, and I couldn't hear anything except the roar of wind and the crash and peal of thunder, but I felt myself going upward at a furious rate, spinning out of control and crashing about like in the tornado.

It went on for some time. I have no idea how high I went. The warm air I was trapped in started to get very cold. That's what happens: as the warm air rises in the convection current, it gets cold and the moisture precipitates into rain or ice. I couldn't have gone as high as the top of the thunderhead, because it's below freezing up there and I would have froze to death. I guess the cell didn't rise that high, thank God. But I started to shiver, just rising and rising, and I started to get pelted with little stinging bits of ice. I curled up to stay warm and not get punched around so much, and of course I started spinning. I didn't care which direction I faced since I couldn't see anything anyway, since the intracloud lightning was below me now, and—even though I could still hear it thundering and exploding—I couldn't see that well anymore, especially with my eyes closed most of the time from fear.

That's when something bumped into me. And that really scared me; I thought, there couldn't be any hail up here that big. The biggest I'd ever heard of was a pound or so, held up by the strong winds inside a cumulonimbus, and this was much bigger than that, and if it was hail that big it would surely hit me like a ton of bricks and probably shatter my ribcage. And then it bumped me again, and I knew it wasn't hail, because it was soft.

And then a hand grabbed my shoulder.

Well, I really screamed. I mean, I let out a wail that made my throat raw. And then the hand wasn't there anymore, so after a minute I unfolded my body and tried to get control. I started shivering immediately, but I kept my arms and legs out, and that didn't do much good because I was still rising and getting punched around. I opened my eyes—even though I must have been streaming with tears and it felt like icicles were forming on my lashes—and I searched the darkness every time the clouds were lit by lightning from below.

I called out, "Josh!" as loudly as I could. I called it over and over even though it sounded like a croak and I could barely hear myself over the roar of the wind.

Well, in a couple of minutes the roar stopped. I had reached stable air at the top of the convection cell. It wasn't really stable—it was still moving and I was still drifting—but it felt stable compared to the updraft. I was shivering in violent little spasms, but I kept my arms out because I didn't want to lose control, and I kept calling Josh's name. But no one answered and I didn't see anything, and I soon got the feeling that it was just imagination, just wishful thinking. I

mean, what kind of coincidence was it, that Stanley had seen him in the nimbostratus a hundred miles away, and then here he was, floating around in the exact same cloud that I had drifted into?

Then a lightning discharge went off close by—it felt like almost under my feet, so close I could make out the channel from the corner of my eye—and I saw him. He floated a few meters off to my right, just a figure caught like in a flashbulb in a dark room, and as the clap of thunder faded I was left with an afterimage of someone floating like me, with arms and legs out, looking at me. So I spun until I thought I was facing that direction, and I thrust my arms out again to stop myself, and in that moment another discharge went off, so close again that I could feel the sound pummeling my chest, and there he was.

HE LOOKED LIKE a ghost. He was pale and thin and soaking, and his clothes were in tatters, and his hair was two years without a trim and the wind and the charge made it float about his head like seaweed in a current. He was two years older than in the picture I had seen, in that coffee shop when I first met Stanley, so I guess he was twelve, and the clothes fit him tightly where they weren't ripped and torn. He sure looked like he had been up here for two years, the poor guy, he was so thin and battered, and again I wondered what he had been eating all this time, and in the next flash I got a look at his face.

I can't even describe his expression. I mean, I don't know what it was. He looked either awestruck or really frightened, and I couldn't tell if he had been floating around up here all this time, frightened out of his wits with every flash of lightning (which was how I felt), or if he had been floating around in excruciating astonishment (which was also how I felt), or if he was just surprised to see someone else up here with him.

After that, I was plunged into darkness for a few minutes, and I couldn't see anything. In the next flash he was gone—snatched by the wind, I thought. So I started calling out his name again, over and over, and I think I threw in a "Help!" now and again though I don't really remember.

I suppose I should have been thinking ahead. I mean, I was floating along at the top of this convection cell, trapped in the current even though it didn't feel like it, and I should have known it would end. But let's face it, a lot had happened. My mind was a jumble, I wasn't thinking anything except that I had seen Josh and I needed to talk to him, because he had somehow survived up here.

Anyway, the downdraft took me by surprise. It was like being snatched in a net: suddenly these great big hands just grabbed me and yanked me down. And then I was falling in a blind panic. My stomach churned, and I screamed like crazy, and all I could think was that it was worse than

falling down the edge of that squall line, because this time I couldn't see the earth rushing up below me and it could kill me at any instant and I wouldn't even know it. So I screamed and screamed and fell totally out of control until suddenly Josh's hand was on my shoulder again.

I tried to grab his wrist but it was slick with water and really thin, and then I realized he was pulling me. I didn't know how. We were both still falling, but he was yanking on my shirt, and we must have been moving sideways, out of the convection cell, because the sensation of falling gradually lessened and the roar of the wind dropped bit by bit.

Now, we don't know that much about the inside of a cumulonimbus, but there must be pools of stable air inside them, probably between the convection cells, because Josh pulled me into one. He dragged me out of that mass of warming, rushing air and released me in this relatively stable area of even warmer air. Suddenly I could breathe easily and I felt a tingling—not from the charge but from my warming fingers—and the roar of the current was a few meters behind me. I opened my eyes and in the distant flashes saw that I was gently rising, the static rubberband was pulling me back up and the clouds were dropping slowly downward. So I closed my eyes and breathed deeply and tried to calm myself.

An explosion of thunder made me snap my eyes open again. This time it was close; I mean, it had been close before but this time it was right on top of me. The sound deafened me, and the shock of superheated air actually pushed me back. I could feel the heat on my face, it was so close. A second flash shot down the same channel, and I saw Josh again. He was directly in front of me, just a few meters away, and I realized why he and Stanley didn't get fried to a crisp up on the roof that night. Because in the second flash there was Josh right in front of me, and the channel was bending around him. I couldn't believe it. And Josh just stared back at me, this strange kid floating in the cloud, lit by harsh electrical light with this really strange expression on his face that had nothing to do with the hundreds of thousands of volts passing right by him. He just stared at me like this happened every day and my presence was far more important than the bolt of lightning which could have burnt him to a cinder in a quick half second.

The channel stopped igniting so it was pretty dim then, but flashes were still going off in the cloud all around us, lighting the clouds like silver curtains, and in each distant flash I could still see his dim figure floating a few meters off. So I called his name again, and he didn't say anything. Then I realized something else. I could barely hear my own voice, not because of the roar of the convection current, which was distant now, or the clap of thunder, which came and went. I could barely hear my own voice because the peals of thunder had been so loud that I could no longer hear much more than a painful ringing.

Josh was deaf. Like Quasimodo in the bell tower, he couldn't hear anything but the clap of thunder and the roar of the storm, and my puny little voice wouldn't rate even as much as the buzzing of an insect would to you.

But he must have seen my mouth moving, because at that moment he did a strange thing. He pulled his arms in a little and kind of twisted his body, like a dancer adjusting balance at the top of a leap or whatever, and suddenly he slid out of sight. He slid *down*, for God's sake, and shot out of sight even while I was traveling upward. He was like a sailplane pilot—you know, how they ride rising and falling temperature currents, and that's how they fly for hours when you or I would just fall like a shot.

So much was happening that I didn't think at that time what it actually meant. I was just thinking that Josh knew how to stay alive up here and not get battered to death in the storm, and I needed to learn that really quick or I would die, and I was still in danger unless he helped me.

Well, he helped me, all right. I kept spinning around and calling his name, and it turned out he was staying behind me all the time. And this really scared me, because I thought he was trying to kill me, and if anyone could do it up there, he certainly could. What happened was, another discharge occurred right next to me, only a few meters away. It still scared the hell out of me, this sudden blinding flash, and the crackle in the air, and the pounding of this deafening sound. And then Josh shoved me from behind. His thin little fists pushed me like some sort of hammer. I never saw him, but he must have got a running start, he hit me so hard. And I flew right toward the place where the bolt had struck. I screamed again, I thought he was pushing me into the lightning. And in fact, that's exactly what he was doing, because when I hit the channel I fell.

Thinking back on it, I guess the remnant charge in the channel must have depleted the charge in my body. I hit the channel and dropped like a rocket I don't know how many meters.

It felt like stepping off a cliff. You've probably guessed what that meant, but I didn't even think of it; I just thought Josh was trying to kill me. Every time lightning flashed close by he pushed me into it and I couldn't stop him, he moved so quickly, riding the temperature and static charge gradients like a dancer on a stage.

I finally got the idea about the time that I started getting pelted with rain. Every time he pushed me into a lightning channel, I dropped with a rush. It even stopped scaring me. I let him push me around like a chess piece on a game board and bit by bit we fell. After some time we came out under the clouds, and I saw lights moving below—it must have been a road—and the lights of a few houses in the distance. We were still traveling with the storm because the road disappeared from sight after I dropped a couple of times.

Josh must have been loosing his own charge as well, because he stayed with me almost all the way down. It was pretty dark under the clouds and out in the open somewhere. There weren't any lights or anything, so I never saw the ground except briefly in the lightning. The last drop was about twice as long, I guess gravity overcame the remaining charge because I dropped like a rock. I hit pretty hard: not even in a tree or a bush or anything, just right into a pool of mud that knocked the breath out of me and felt like cement until I sank into it.

I lay there for a long time, staring up at the sky as the rain pelted me. I couldn't move. I was really in pain somewhere, and I was in shock. I wasn't thinking anything, just lying there glad it was over and hoping the lightning wouldn't find me now that I had no charge to deflect it. It was hitting all around, like colossal hammers striking the earth, and somewhere in the middle of my shocked, numbed brain I realized that it was moving away. Each strike sounded farther and farther off, and I just lay there feeling relieved.

After a time, my eyes adjusted and I saw Josh floating above me. I couldn't turn my head to follow him, but he was up there, drifting in and out of sight. I guess he was so light that the little charge he had left kept him up. It was too dark and he was too far away, so I couldn't see his expression. I wondered if he was checking to see if I was okay or hoping I was dead. After a while, he just drifted off, and I never saw him again.

I LAY THERE for hours, listening to the ringing in my ears. It was warm as a jacuzzi, but every once in a while I shivered with these violent little shocks. Eventually that went away, and little by little the rain stopped, and pretty soon the stars came out. I just stared at them, watching as the storm drifted off like a veil lifting, and then there were only bits and patches of clouds, and that drifted off until I could see the whole sky, and that was all I thought about until the sun came up.

As it got light, I realized I was somewhere near a road, because the ringing was going away and every so often I heard cars whooshing by like waves on a distant shore, so when I felt strong enough I tried to prop myself up on my elbows.

And then I screamed because I had broken both my legs.

So I dropped back into the mud and lay there in pain for a long time. I shouted for help, but of course no one heard me, so I found a stick and picked it up and started waving and screaming.

Still no one heard, so eventually I dragged myself toward the road, grabbing little clumps of dirt and grass, and I swear I've never done anything so painful in my whole life. It took me about an hour and a half even though the road was much closer than I thought. Eventually I made it to the shoulder, and I just waved my arms until someone pulled over to help me.

Well, there's not much more to tell. An ambulance took me to a hospital in Joplin, because the storm had carried me all the way back into Missouri. They set my legs and put bandages on my nose and fingers where the cold had frozen them, and everyone had to shout because I was deaf for days. They asked what had happened, but I wouldn't tell them. I didn't know what to tell them. And for that whole first day I was just in shock. I could hardly make sense out of what they were saying, much less how to answer them. So they put me in a room, and I just slept and thought of nothing for that whole day.

But I lay awake all that night, and I thought of Josh. And mostly I thought, he must have known who I was. I mean, he wasn't floating around up there aimlessly. He even knew how to regain his charge without the machine, otherwise he would have hit the ground with me, but he didn't. So he knew what he was doing.

So maybe he had been watching his father all these years, why else had Stanley seen him so many times?

And maybe he had been watching when Stanley and I met. And when we tried the machine. And when I finally got up there, no thanks to Stanley.

I called Des Moines information the next morning and got Stanley's home number. Mags answered the phone. She was a pleasant enough lady, but she sounded kind of tired and she didn't seem to want to speak to me, especially since she had to shout. So I just gave her the number at the hospital and told her to have Stanley call me. Then I called my girlfriend in Chicago and told her I had been in an accident and where I was.

Stanley called the day after that. The first thing he said was, "You're in Joplin? How the hell did you get all the way over there?"

So I said, "How do you think?" and I wouldn't tell him any more. He got there that night. They wanted to discharge me from the hospital by then, but I said I was waiting for my girlfriend to come get me, and besides, I had plenty of insurance paying for it as long as I didn't try to claim I had fallen from a cloud. And if anyone deserved a rest, I certainly did.

So he got there that night, and I told him what happened. He listened very quietly to every word, just nodding his head and staring at the bedsheets as if he thought he could stare right through them, and when I finished he looked at me like he didn't understand something, and not understanding angered him.

"So where is he?" he said. "Why didn't you bring him down?"

I just sighed. "Stanley, it's so scrambled in my head, maybe I didn't make it clear. He's like a fish in water up there. He never needed my help; he already knows how to get down. I mean, *he saved me*." I stopped and looked at Stanley. He

still glared at me, doing his best to misunderstand every word. So I took another deep sigh, and I looked at him squarely, and I said, "Stanley, he doesn't want down."

And the words just sat there like heavy bricks between us.

After a minute Stanley screwed up his face, like he wanted to get mad but didn't feel right getting mad at me, which I guess was the case, and then without a word he stood up and left, and I didn't hear from him for months.

My girlfriend took me back to Chicago. I stayed in bed until my legs healed up, and for a while after that I felt pain whenever I took a step, and to this day I walk with a limp in both legs. I talked to Stanley a couple of times, and in November he came out with Josh's machine. He said he didn't want it but couldn't destroy it, so he gave it to me. I showed it to my friends and they just laughed. So I took it to a couple of meteorologists we knew, and when they played around with it and just laughed, I pretty much stopped talking about it.

But I have to be honest, I tried again next season. I took it out to that hillside where I had first floated, and I charged myself up, and I felt that static charge, and my teeth hurt again, just like before. And I jumped off rocks until my legs ached, but I never got very far off the ground.

Though I would swear, I felt pretty light at the top of each jump.

We all went out that season, and we had a good time. At the end of it, they went back to Chicago and I went to Des Moines. I had called ahead so Stanley knew I was coming. When I found his house I just stood looking at it for a while. It was not that big, but it had a wide porch, and above the front door was the peak of the roof where Josh had stepped off into the sky.

Mags was a nice lady. She didn't look so tired as she had sounded on the phone the year before. I guess it was because they had a baby now, a little boy, and because Stanley had given up his truck driving job. He was a dock manager now at a big warehouse, and he was home every night and every weekend, and she seemed happy that he had made a decision like that.

So we talked for a while in the living room, and then Stanley and I sat out on the porch and drank beer and talked, and strangely enough we talked mostly about the new baby. He kept saying over and over, in different ways, how happy he was that he had a new son. We talked about Josh once or twice, but it just didn't seem that important to him. Which was good, I suppose.

All the same, the whole time we talked he kept glancing up into the clear blue sky. And when I left an hour or so later, I saw something I hadn't noticed before, which was a pair of binoculars hanging from the porch rail, well within reach of Stanley's comfortable chair.

Contributors

About the Authors & Artists

Christopher Angelucci is native to Philadelphia. His work has appeared in the fanzine *Immortal Tales* and in the *Blades* supplement for Black Gate Publishing's *Legacy—War of Ages* roleplaying game.

Elizabeth Barrette has been studying ancient religions, mythology, and assorted sciences for many years. A graduate of the University of Illinois with a Rhetoric major and a Women's Studies minor, she made her first sale (an invocation) to *SageWoman* magazine. She now regularly publishes "articles, ritual and invocational material, poetry, reviews, and (finally!) fiction. I favor science fiction and fantasy but work a great deal in Pagan markets as well."

Among numerous other slots, Barrette has a column, "Into the Green," which appears in *SageWoman*; "Book Reviews from Hypatia's Hoard" for the *INTERMIX* science-fiction and fantasy online magazine; and "Cauldrons and Broomsticks" with *Pandora's Pagan-Web*. "Besides that, I continue to publish assorted pieces in a wide variety of markets, with my main fantasy and science-fiction appearances in *INTERMIX* (poetry, short fiction, and essays) and the webzine *E-escape* (short fiction and non-fiction). I also have two anthology pieces coming up: the short-story 'Hatred Is Not A Family

Value' in *Abrupt Darkness* and the poem 'A Steed of Steel and Silver' in *The Mindsparks Science Fiction Poetry Anthology*."

Barrette can be reached at PO Box 318, Charleston IL 61920. She enjoys public speaking and often participates in panels at sf and fantasy conventions, on topics ranging from alternative religions and lifestyles to xenolinguistics (the study or creation of alien or invented languages or both). "Favorite pastimes include white-water rafting on the stream of consciousness and suspension-of-disbelief bungee-jumping."

Nancy Bennett has a chapbook entitled *Father Was a Demon from the Stars* coming out from Crash Landing Press. Her sf and horror work can be seen in such publications as *TransVerriens*, *Deadlines*, and *Starline*, among others. She spends her spare time researching Canadian ghosts, myths, and odd occurrences.

Meleney Coit is a folklorist who studies the politics of textbook publishing in West Africa. She's also done fieldwork with on-line folk culture. Her short story "The Garden" was a semifinalist in the Writers of the Future Contest in the first quarter of this year, and she has smuggled sf literature in-

side the ivied walls of a stodgy university to the great delight of her mostly male students.

L. Timmel Duchamp made her first fiction sale seven years ago, and her writing has since appeared in numerous respected anthologies and magazines. She has sold stories to the likes of *Arimov's SF*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and the award-winning anthology *Full Spectrum*. She also has stories upcoming in *Arimov's SF*; the science-fiction volume of *Bending the Landscape*; *Cybertex*, a British anthology; and the non-genre anthology *Lerbian Short Fiction*. But don't just look for her work in the high-visibility markets: she has an impressive list of credits in the small press as well.

Duchamp told us, "I enjoy hiking in the mountains and on the coast of the Olympic Peninsula; like most residents of Seattle, I'm a great coffee drinker (which might be germane to 'Ms. Peach'); and lately I've been doing freelance medical editing a few hours a week."

When we asked Kandis Elliot to tell us something about herself, she provided the following Biographical Secrets Unknown to Date:

"I've had a dramatically misspent youth, taking more than ten years to

get my bachelor's and master's degrees at the University of Wisconsin (in biology and zoology), finally taking an Associate Degree in Applied Arts so I could earn an easier living than that of biology instructor. One of my memorable thrills at the university was getting bombed out of my biology office (where I was illicitly sleeping off a bottle of Ripple Pagan Pink) when the Army Math Research Center across the way got blown up, early in the morning in August, 1970. As a pre-press illustrator and computer wacker, I now live a sedentary life in the electromagnetic radiation zone, but I once engaged in biological research excursions in the rain forests of the Yucatán Peninsula and in the Sargasso Sea at the Bermuda Biological Research Station. I have also lived and starved on the streets, whence came many of the characters described in 'Judgementality,' including the snobby, hypocritical narrator, the likes of whom I am still shocked to see everywhere—including at sf cons, I'm ashamed to say (not that I exempt myself, you understand).

"Presently I am searching for medical miracles to restore some of my eyesight, having had a recent lens implant and a cornea transplant. Not that I ever had good vision, but the misshapen eyes I was born with were better done in during a fight in my monage, when I got stabbed in the eyes. Of all the snakes, spiders, scorpions, shaks, brujos, and other nasties I've run across, I must say the most dangerous thing I've ever been around is a broken beer bottle.

"You'll find biology in most of my stories, especially a series featuring Charles D. Farnsworth, zoologist-cum-detective, who has appeared in *Asimov's* five times and twice in *Ellery Queen*, including the June '96 issue. However, I have not refrained from social commentary, as seen in two recent stories, one in *Science Fiction Age* (May '96) and, of course, 'Judgementality' in this issue of *Terra Incognita*."

Michael Ford is a Los Angeles resident who tells us that his education "includes a little junior college and a lot of Heinlein." He makes a living with electronics and owns neither cats nor dogs. "A Striving After Wind" is his first published story.

Perhaps it is because Jessica J. Frasca is a scientist (she holds a BS in Biology and has worked in many research positions) that she was inspired to write "On Bringing Up Shapeshifters." We hope it has nothing to do with any one of her three children. . . .

This is Frasca's first published science-fiction poem published, but it's far from her first literary accomplishment. A graduate of the 1995 Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop, Frasca has published several mystery poems as well as a number of mystery, sf, and literary stories.

GAK has worked for the government, but he's currently employed by one of the Philadelphia-area Tower Records stores. His work can be found in numerous magazines, as well as lurking here and there on the World Wide Web. Among his influences are Dr. Seuss, John R. Neil (the Victorian-era illustrator of the Oz books); and the art of Australian Aborigines, Northwest Native Americans, and ancient Egyptians and Mayans.

Winner of the 1993 James Tiptree, Jr. Memorial Award (created to promote sf and fantasy which "explore and expand gender roles") and the 1993 Lambda Literary Award (for lesbian fiction) for her novel *Ammunite*, Nicola Griffith was also nominated recently for the prestigious Nebula Award for her book *Slow River*. Griffith's stories have appeared in *Asimov's SF*, *Interzone*, and elsewhere.

Griffith is also an accomplished essayist; her nonfiction will appear in *PAPA'DOXA: The Journal of World Literary Genres*, *SF Eye*, and *Nebula Awards 30*.

Currently, she is working on a mainstream novel called *Penny in My Mouth*. A collection of some of Griffith's essays and stories, *Women and Other Aliens*, will be out later this year. She is also busy co-editing (with Stephen Pagel) a three-volume anthology series entitled *Bending the Landscape*—a collection of all-original stories (one volume is fantasy, one science fiction, and one horror) featuring gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters. The first volume should be out from White Wolf in March of next year.

David Grilla does a great deal of work for magazines like *Tomorrow*, *Aberrations*, *The Leading Edge*, and *Pirate Writings*. He was recently honored with a ten-best award at an annual New England science-fiction convention for a series of drawings entitled "Twister Sisters."

Tasha Kelly, was there when *Terra Incognita* got its start. She envisioned a magazine of strictly Earth-based science fiction. Before moving on to pursue other interests, Kelly was instrumental in the decision to make *Terra Incognita* a magazine actively open to feminist and socially relevant science fiction. We hope that the magazine fulfills her hopes and expectations.

The work of Alfred R. Klosterman frequently appears in such magazines as *Aberrations*, *Magnit de* and *Pirate Writings*. Klosterman can be reached for illustration assignments at 3550 Stouton Street, Philadelphia PA 19134-2026.

For his day job, Keith Minnion works as a Document Automation Specialist for the government. What does this mean? "I design and maintain internet websites and help produce CDs of technical manuals and document collections," he says. He has also served as an officer in the Navy and a school teacher.

Before working regularly as an illustrator (selling illustrations and covers to several horror and sf magazines, including *Cemetery Dance*, *Deathbreath*, *Scream Factory*, and *Weird Tales* (now *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror*)), he sold sf stories in the late '70's and early '80's to such markets as *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. He has recently done work for Ray Garton's *Pieces of Hate*, Richard Laymon's forthcoming *Wild*, and Tom Piccirilli's *Pentacle*. Minnion will also appear in *Night Terrors* #1 with both a short story and an illustration.

Lucy Cohen Schmeidler's reviews and essays have appeared in *Eidolon: The Journal of Australian Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *The New York Review of Science Fiction*. A resident of New York City, she specializes in science fiction works by Australian writers.

"Believing in the Twentieth Century" is one of few science-fiction stories written by Darrell Schweitzer, who spends most of his time writing fantasy

and horror stories and novels. His short fiction has been collected in *We Are All Legends, Transients and Other Disquieting Stories*, and *Tom O'Bedlam's Night Out*. Schweitzer has published three novels. *The White Isle* is available from *Weird Tales Library*. *The Shattered Goddess* and his most recent work, *The Mask of the Sorcerer*, are published by New English Library.

Schweitzer is World Fantasy Award-winning editor of *Worlds of Fantasy & Horror* (formerly *Weird Tales*), and the third issue has recently been published.

In addition to writing science fiction, Eric Sonstroem does research and writes scripts for a radio program called "A Moment of Science," which can be heard on many public radio stations nationwide and around the world on Armed Forces Radio Network. He has also co-authored *How Can You Tell if a Spider is Dead?*—a general interest science book due out in the fall of 1996 from Indiana University Press. He has sold fiction to *Pirate*

Writings and *tomorrow speculative fiction*. "Jukebox City" is his first published sf story.

Although W. Gregory Stewart has no difficulty spinning beautiful prose, he is also a highly decorated science fiction poet. He has won the Rhysling Award for Science-Fiction Poetry three times and the Fluvanna Award for Light Verse. He now administers the Rhysling Award. He also received a Nebula nomination for one of his Rhysling Award-winning pieces and the 1994 Asimov's Readers Award for his poem "when the voices . . ." (*Asimov's SF*, November 1994).

"More importantly," says Stewart, "I am the exuberant father of Jesse the Wonder Bundle, on whom I co-commit parenting with St. Helen the Patient."

Stewart asked of himself, "What do *The New Yorker* and the space shuttle have in common?" His answer: "I've never been in either one. . ."

Submit . . .

. . . but be sure to submit properly! The best place for you to learn about what we need is in our Contributors' Guidelines (see page 19 for information on how to get them). Please be sure to observe the following:

- When you submit fiction manuscripts you must use proper manuscript format. (If you don't know what that means, take a trip to your local library—or, better yet, join a writers' group with experienced writers.)
- We ask that you save yourself time and effort by querying us before sending any non-fiction articles.
- Artists interested in illustration assignments should submit a portfolio of copies of their work.
- Every submission or query must be accompanied by an self-addressed, stamped envelope. And if you want your submission back, the envelope must be large enough to hold it!

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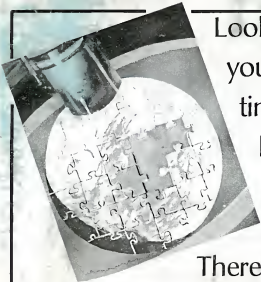
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